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IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

BY

SIR GILBERT CAMPBELL, BART.

LONDON:
SPENCER BLACKETT
(Successor to J. & R. Maxwell)
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IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

CHAPTER I.

BY MUTUAL CONSENT.

THOUGH so many years have passed away, yet I can still shut my eyes, and see all those strange events that happened at the time of the old lord's death. I do not suppose that I shall ever set eyes again upon the dark, weather-stained walls of Moreton Court, within which the greater part of my life was passed, to the latter portion of which I now look back with a feeling of shuddering and loathing that I can hardly express. I was the only daughter of old Simon Ryot, the butler, or the house-steward, as he preferred to be called, and had always been brought up to reverence the Moretons as the highest and greatest of men. When my poor old father died (I had never known my mother) I was the still-room maid, and had been courted by Abel Kershaw, who had been my father's right-hand man in his declining years. Well, after the funeral, my lord

and my lady sent for me to the oak parlour. I can well remember what a grand-looking couple I thought them. My lady was a tall, handsome woman, with very dark hair and eyes, and her black velvet robe, and the string of pearls she always wore round her neck, became her admirably. My lord had his hair dressed in a *queue*, with a dash of powder, and was a fine man enough, but there was a wild gleam in his eyes, and a cruel curve in the corners of his mouth, which showed that he had all the fierce and violent disposition of the Moretons.

Well, my lady she up and spoke to me as soon as I had dropped my curtsey.

"Hester," said she, "your father was a good servant to the house of Moreton, and my lord and I think that something ought to be done———"

"Especially for such a pretty girl," broke in his lordship, with a leer at me, which I knew my place too well to notice.

"Pray be quiet," said my lady, holding up her finger in a warning manner; "and so, Hester, as we hear that you have fixed your choice on a steady, sober young man like Abel Kershaw, we have arranged that he shall be the house-steward, and you the housekeeper, though you are full young for such a post."

Me to be the housekeeper of Moreton Court! I could hardly believe my ears. I could feel my cheeks burning, but couldn't lay tongue to a word to express my thanks.

"There, child, that will do," said my lord, giving me a tap on the cheek, at which I could see my lady draw

herself up and frown; "You may go down now, and send up Abel to me."

I just remembered enough to make my curtsey, and to get out of the room as best I could, and after Abel had had his interview—and I warrant he didn't act so like a gaby as I had done—he came down and told me that it was my lord's and lady's pleasure that we should be married the next week but one, and enter upon our duties at once. Well, to make a long story short, we were married, and a fine wedding we had of it, for my lord gave a grand supper in the great hall, and all the farmers and their men were there; ay, and he gave me a smacking kiss directly it was all over, which made poor Abel look mighty glum; and there was fiddling, and dancing, and singing, and health-drinking, until I thought I should not be able to keep my eyes open any longer.

At last, however, we all settled down, and though I was at first a little afraid of the maids—because, do you see, I was so young—yet, out of respect to my poor old father, I suppose, who had never done any one an ill turn, nobody disputed my orders, and I soon began to feel quite comfortable and happy in my new position.

But things did not go smoothly for long. I don't mean with us poor servants, but with my lord and lady.

My lady was high-spirited, and, if I may say it, had a temper of her own; whilst my lord was as wild as a hawk, always taken up with his horses, his dogs, and his boon companions; now starting off to some distant race meeting or prize fight, and stopping away for days

without giving any warning of his intentions, or fuddling himself with punch at the "Seven Stars," which was a little alehouse in the village, where the London coach used to pull up to take in the letters and the parcels; or else (and this angered my lady more than all) he would be hanging after Madge Hempston, the miller's red-cheeked daughter, and a saucy, impudent trollop she was, I promise you. My lady was, on her side, of as good a stock as her husband, and was a great stickler for dignity, so all these breaches of etiquette on my lord's part, and the neglect with which he treated all county families, refusing their invitations, and neglecting to return their visits, made her terribly angry, and many bitter words passed between them. It was a sad sight to see that proud, handsome lady, sitting all alone in one of the vast rooms of the great silent house, nursing her baby (for there was a baby boy now), a poor, puny, ailing little thing, with not a sign about it of the good looks of either its father or mother, and gazing out of one of the lattice windows down the long avenue awaiting the coming of her husband, who as likely as not would come galloping along, mad with the spirits he had been taking, and, flinging himself off his horse, would stagger along the passages and corridors, shouting out a stave of a hunting song.

Such a life, however, could not go on for ever. So long as my lord contented himself with pursuing his riotous diversions outside the house, my lady bore it, if not with patience, at least with a certain amount of resignation; but when he began to bring home his boisterous associates with him, and made the very

rafters of the old Court ring with the shouts of their tipsy revelry, her whole soul rose up in open rebellion, and there was a more bitter quarrel than ever. Loud and long it raged, and Abel and I, who feared that mischief would arise from the strife of two such high spirits, had crawled up as near to the door as we dared. Suddenly it was flung open, and my lady appeared on the threshold, her bosom heaving with suppressed sobs, and her lace-edged kerchief pressed tightly to her lip, from which a thin stream of blood was trickling.

"Hester," said she, in a voice still quivering with passion, "get my clothes and my son's packed at once; and, Abel, bid John, the coachman, get the chariot ready to take me to Deepborough, where I may get a postchaise to carry me on to London."

"To London!" repeated Abel, aghast.

"Ay, to London, fool!" returned the deep voice of my lord, as his livid face appeared in the doorway. "Does not devilment of every kind find its way there?"

My lady turned round, oh, so quickly, and cast upon him a look of bitter scorn, that, bold as my lord was, his eyes sank beneath hers, and he stood plucking uneasily at his lace ruffles.

"Is it necessary, Lord Moreton," asked she, in her haughty manner, "to make our menials sharers in our mutual arrangements, or to show them the marks of tenderness you lavish upon the woman you swore at the altar to love, cherish, and protect?" And as she spoke she dashed her hand passionately against her bleeding lip. "Go, Hester," she added in softer tones,

"see that all is ready in an hour from this;" and, without bestowing another look upon her husband, she swept from the room like an outraged queen.

I followed her to her bedchamber, and there found her weeping passionately over her boy, who kicked and struggled as she caressed him; but when I offered my poor consolations she checked me sternly, and when I asked for orders as to the future guidance of the household, she answered that she had none to give.

"But bear this in mind, Hester Kershaw," said she, "I will never enter Moreton Court again whilst Lord Moreton is alive, or until he has gone to join the rest of his bad, cruel race in the west wing."

I shuddered at her words, and wondered how she had heard anything about that portion of the house, for it was a matter that was seldom spoken of, and the west wing had now been given over for many years to the bats and owls, and, if report might be credited, to still more uncanny tenants.

At length the great heavy coach was in readiness, and my lady's parcels and boxes were carried down to it, while Kate Summers, who was to accompany my lady to town to take charge of the young lord, appeared at the door with her face all swollen with weeping, for she had just been taking leave of her fellow-servants, with whom she had passed nearly all her life, and the idea of going among strangers terrified her greatly. My lady swept down the oak staircase, and across the great hall, all hung with the portraits of dead and gone Moretons, and swords, and pieces of armour of strange and bygone shapes. At the door stood my lord, ready to

hand her into the coach. To all outward appearance he had quite recovered his calmness, but there was a bright red spot upon each cheek, and upon a small side table in one of the windows I caught sight of a flask of French brandy, and an emptied glass. I could see that my lady saw this too, for her lip curled; but she uttered no sound, and made her way to the open door. Then she motioned to Kate Summers, who held the baby in her arms, to get into the coach, and was about to follow her, when my lord stepped forward and offered her his hand. She drew hastily back, and for a moment I thought that she would have struck him across the face; but she quickly recovered herself, and, declining his proferred aid with a deep curtsey, passed through the door and got into the coach.

"When your ladyship is tired of the gaieties of town," said my lord, with a mocking smile, as he followed her to the carriage, "I trust that we shall see you again at this poor country house."

"If I ever do come back here," hissed she, in reply, "it shall be in my coffin, and then take care, for my unquiet spirit shall make your house a hell. If ever you do say a prayer, Lord Moreton, let it be that you may never see me again."

The coach lumbered heavily off, and my lord, with an awkward attempt at a laugh, shut himself up in his own room with his trusty companion, the flask of French brandy.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT WAS DONE IN THE CHURCHYARD.

AFTER my lady's departure, things got worse and worse. My lord filled his house with the greatest crew of ruffians that could be picked up in the neighbourhood—jockeys, horse-dealers, prize-fighters, and a few of the wilder young bloods belonging to the county. The old house was full of drinking and songs, and boisterous revelry. Nearly all the indoor servants had been dismissed, though there were plenty of grooms in the stables, for my lord had increased his stud of hunters and steeple-chasers. Then there were all sorts of cruel sports going on by day—cock-fighting, rat-hunting, and badger-baiting—whilst sometimes two poor dogs would be worried until they almost tore each other to pieces, or the brutes—for I cannot call them men—would be set to pound their faces to a jelly, or to beat each other over the head with cudgels. But there were worse doings than these, for when it was too dark for out-door amusements, there would be heavy drinking and high play, and many a poor fellow hsa ridden away from Moreton Court cursing the evil fate that had led him to risk his all at the gaming table.

Ah! they were wild and wicked days at Moreton Court after my lady had left.

As for her, we heard but little about her, and that little made my heart ache. Stray scraps of news would find their way down to us occasionally, telling us that Lady Moreton was mixed up with the gayest and most frivolous set in London; that she was to be seen at masquerades, and various places of amusement that were rather shunned by those who had much regard for their reputation and respectability; and what was more, that her name had begun to be coupled with that of a certain captain in His Majesty's Guards, of the name of Gerald Fotheringham.

My lord heard all these rumours, but he only laughed at them, or indulged in an evil sneer at my lady's doings, and muttered something about each going their own way, and so matters went on for some eighteen months.

The winter was now drawing very nigh, though there had not been frost enough to stop the hunting; and one evening, after a hard day's run, my lord came back to the Court accompanied by a stranger whom he had picked up in the hunting field, who, to the extreme surprise of all of us, turned out to be the very same Captain Fotheringham whose name had been mixed up with my lady's in London.

But my lord did not seem to mind this a bit. He drank, and swore, and joked with my lady's last sweetheart, as he called him, with the utmost freedom, although there was an occasional savage look in his face when he thought that he was entirely unobserved.

He had been taken by the captain's bold riding in the hunting field, had introduced himself to him, and insisted on his coming home with him, and making the Court his home for the next few days, and a rare rollicking night they had of it. There were my lord and the captain, and the two sons of Squire Harewood, of the Grange, Sam Jarvis, landlord of the "Seven Stars," littl e Ben Cramp, the jockey, Jim Herbert, whom everyone said had left London because town was growing too hot for him, and a swaggering fellow, who said he had been a captain in the Indies, but who was believed to be only a deserter from the Company's service after all. But my lord thought all these men good enough to sit at his table.

Ah! how my poor old father would have shaken his head if he could have seen the table, at which he had waited upon the first nobility of the land, disgraced by so motley a crew. Well, they had a roaring night of it, and such as were able staggered off to their beds, promising to be up betimes in the morning, and have another long day with the hounds; but when the morning came, there was no chance of a hunt. The snow had come down like a heavy winding sheet, and covered hill and valley, moor and fell, with a carpet of dazzling whiteness.

There was nothing left for the crew that my lord had gathered together but to find out some means of amusement. First they tried what they called a "hair of the dog that bit them," which meant glasses of raw spirits; but they soon settled down to cards, and here Captain Fotheringham proved himself to be mighty

proficient. The cards seemed to come and go at his will. Whatever he betted on turned up, and Jim Herbert, who knew something about play, began to look rather curiously at the captain, and abstained from betting altogether. Not so my lord, who grew more and more eager as his losses increased, and at last, when all his ready money was exhausted, asked for permission to play on parole, but the captain very coolly said that, though he did not for a moment doubt his host's honour, yet he had made it a rule through life only to play for ready money, but that, as soon as my lord had furnished himself again with funds, he would be happy to give him his revenge.

With this answer my lord was fain to be content, and, throwing himself sulkily back into his chair, began to drink heavily.

At length, after eying the captain angrily, he said:

"Captain Fotheringham, you have given the lie to-night to a proverb which says, 'Lucky at cards, unlucky in love.'"

"I am at a loss to understand your lordship's meaning," says the captain, quite coolly.

"Why, man," retorts his lordship, with an oath, "have you not been making love to my wife ever since she has been in London?"

"Hush, my lord," says the captain. "That lady's name should not be uttered in such society as the present."

"If the society is good enough for me, it's good enough for me to mention my wife's name in," answers my lord, sulkily.

"I don't think you are a fit judge as to what is right and wrong just now," returns the captain, as coolly as ever.

"Do you mean that I am drunk?" roars my lord, starting to his feet.

The captain made no reply, but smiled and nodded his head slightly.

"By heavens!" cries my lord, coming round to the side of the table where the captain was sitting. "The man who says I am drunk, lies!"

"Gentlemen," says the captain, calmly, "You see the unpleasant position in which I am placed. I cannot return the insult which my host has put upon me, in his own house, therefore I will retire to my room, and if his lordship has not recovered his senses to-morrow, he shall hear from me as soon as I am no longer under his roof."

"You shall not leave the room until you have apologised to me, and confessed that you are a dastardly liar!" shouts his lordship, foaming with rage.

"Gentlemen," urged the captain, "do not let this unpleasant scene continue. It had best be settled to-morrow. Meanwhile, permit me to retire to my room."

But those whom he addressed were a rough, unruly crew. Besides, they enjoyed seeing a Londoner, and more especially a man who had won their money, baited; so they made no reply to this appeal.

After a short pause, the captain made a step or two towards the door, and as he did so, my lord, boiling over with wrath, rushed at him, and endeavoured to strike

him in the face. But the captain was much the more powerful man of the two, and, grasping Lord Moreton's arm, sent him staggering backwards against the wall.

"It is enough," said he calmly, turning to the elder of the two young Squire Harewoods. "Bear witness I have done all I could to avoid this quarrel. Will you act for me, and wait upon his lordship in my behalf to-morrow morning?"

"Now! now!" screamed his lordship; "no more delay. Do you think I had not guessed that he was sent down by that—(and here my lord alluded to his wife in the most improper manner)—to see if I was drinking myself to death fast enough? But directly I heard his name, I got him over here, for I would not have lost sight of him for a million of guineas."

"I will not fight in a house where I am a guest," returned the captain; "therefore the meeting must perforce be put off until to-morrow."

"Come into the park then, you cowardly skulk!" shouted my lord.

"The same objection applies to the park as to the house," replied the captain, taking no notice of the insult.

"You can fight in the churchyard, captain, if you have the stomach for it," says little Ben Cramp, with a sneer. "That don't belong to my lord, but to old brandy-faced Parson Hinxton, who won't break his neck, and give my lord the presentation to the living."

"Capital!" cries my lord, eagerly, "and we can hang a couple of stable lanterns in the ivy on the tower, so that we may have plenty of light."

There was no friendly voice raised to make peace, and in a few moments the whole party had enveloped themselves in cloaks and wrappers, and were tramping through the deep snow to the little church which stood some hundred yards from the Court.

The preliminaries were soon settled, and my poor old Abel, who had followed the party, told me what took place.

The lanterns were fixed in the ivy, and the two gentlemen were placed twelve paces from each other. Before the word to fire was given, Captain Fotheringham said in solemn tones—

"Bear witness all of you, that this quarrel is not of my seeking, and that I have done all that I could to prevent it.

"Enough talking, sir," returned my lord angrily, "the time for that has passed."

Squire Harewood gave the word, one pistol-shot rang sharply out through the frosty air, and the captain's hat fell to the ground.

"Why did you not fire, sir?" demanded my lord, with an angry oath.

By way of reply, Captain Fotheringham raised the muzzle of his weapon, and discharged it in the air. "I have received your fire, my lord," answered he, "and I appeal to these gentlemen if honour is not fully satisfied."

"Of course, if the gentleman liked to run the risk of a bullet in his skin, no one can prevent him," said Jim Herbert.

"I am of an entirely different opinion," interposed

the swaggering captain from the Indies. "I consider that Captain Fotheringham has cast an additional insult on Lord Moreton by firing in the air, and that another exchange of shots is inevitable."

"Do you hear, sir?" asked Lord Moreton, "or are we to have a fresh proof of your cowardice?"

Captain Fotheringham's sole reply was to extend his hand to his second for another pistol.

"Are you going to hit him this time?" asked young Harewood, as he handed it to him.

"I shall defend my life, now," answered the captain, evasively.

Again the word was given, and almost before the last sound had been uttered, the captain's pistol-shot rang out, and my lord turning half round discharged his pistol at random.

"Foul play!" he roared, "foul play, quick, give me another pistol to shoot the dog as he stands, for this is murder."

For a few seconds he stood erect, the blood from his wound dyeing the pure snow at his feet, for the bullet had struck him just above the hip joint; then with a long wailing cry he fell heavily to the earth.

The captain maintained his ground, though his face grew livid as he heard the accusation.

"He does not know what he says," he remarked after a moment's silence. "I acted fairly, did I not?" he added, turning to his second.

"I suppose so," returned young Squire Harewood, doubtfully, "but you fired precious sharp."

"I shall sleep at the 'Seven Stars' to-night, and make

for London at once," continued Captain Fotheringham, "If I am wanted I shall be found at the headquarters of my regiment, and now, gentlemen, if you will take my advice, you will remove Lord Moreton into the house, for I greatly fear that he is severely wounded."

CHAPTER III.

THE TENANTS OF THE WEST WING.

You can imagine how flustered I felt when my Abel came tearing in, and told me to get rags, and lint, and bandages as quickly as possible, and then started off Long Tom, one of the stable helpers, to Deepborough to bring back the doctor. It was an awful night for man or beast to venture out in, but Tom, borrowing a shawl to wrap round his ears, and taking a deep draught of brandy, set out on his quest, though it was a very doubtful matter if the doctor would come all that distance, a matter of seven long miles, through the snow. Meanwhile, they brought in my lord, who was now very faint from loss of blood, and could only curse in a stifled voice, when those who carried him stumbled, and laid him in a bed in a room adjoining the great banqueting hall, where the quarrel had taken place. His face had grown quite grey and ashen-looking now, and he spoke almost kindly to me when I did what I could to stop the bleeding; but I and Abel were the only ones that stayed by him, all the rest of his boon companions, had slunk off to the great hall, where there was plenty of liquor still remaining,

and there they sat round the fire, smoking their filthy tobacco, and conversing in low whispers.

The captain and young Squire Harewood had tramped off through the snow to the "Seven Stars," in the hope that the captain might be able to get to London next morning by the coach, unless indeed the heavy snow should prevent its running.

We, that is Abel and I, had a weary watch all through the night, for it was not until nearly three in the morning that the doctor came. Directly he saw my lord, he looked very solemn, and after he had examined the wound, he shook his head very gravely.

"Come, doctor," said my lord, with something of his old manner, "don't cut any more of these long faces, but tell me shall I cheat the devil this time?"

"My lord," returned Doctor Pasmore solemnly, "I will not hide from you that your situation is a very critical one."

"Do you mean that I am going to die?" cried his lordship, half raising himself in bed with a great effort.

"We will do all that we can, but if you have any arrangements to make I would advise you to do so without more delay," returned the doctor. As he spoke a sudden gust of wind tore and raved round the house. The window frames rattled, the ivy on the walls creaked and rasped, and the loose tiles on the deserted west wing crashed down into the courtyard below.

We all gazed upon each other in terror, but my lord was the first to break silence.

"So it is a bad case?"

"So bad, my lord, that I can only repeat my former warning," said Doctor Pasmore.

"Curse the fellow who shot me down like a dog," cried my lord. "Well, if I am as bad as that, I suppose a draught of burnt brandy will do me no harm?"

The doctor made a sign to Abel, who left the room in search of the stimulant.

"Aha," sneered my lord, "no, nothing will hurt me now; well, doctor, do something to make this cursed wound easier, which feels as if a red-hot iron were eating into my vitals, and then go into the great hall, and get your skin full of liquor with the rest of them."

Doctor Pasmore stooped down, and shifted the bandages, and then slipped gently out of the room, and was soon puffing his tobacco with the others. Abel came in with the burnt brandy, and my lord, taking a deep draught, lay back gasping on the pillow, whilst I bathed his forehead on which the large beads of perspiration had begun to gather, and after a time he sunk back into an unquiet slumber. Occasionally one of the topers would steal in on tiptoe to see how my lord was getting on, but on a rapid motion from me would slink quietly away, and resume his drinking and smoking.

Abel, too, had gone to lie down, and I was half dozing off, when all of a sudden the wind which had died away after the first fierce blast, rose up again with redoubled violence, swooping round the gables of the Court, and driving the loose snowflakes before it in fantastic feathery forms, which looked gruesome in the

moonlight. In another moment it whirled a dense bank of clouds across the moor, and at once all was pitchy darkness outside.

"Hester," said a voice, which sounded so strange and unnatural that I started to my feet.

"Yes, my lord," answered I, trembling.

"Who is in the west wing?"

"The west wing, my lord!" returned I, whilst a cold perspiration bedewed every limb. "No one; you know it has been shut up for years."

"You lie, you beldam," retorted he, fiercely. "I tell you there is something there that neither bolt or bar can keep out. Give me the brandy again."

In fear and terror I handed him the bowl. He drained what remained in it at a draught.

"To the tenants of the west wing," he cried feebly, and cast the bowl into the middle of the room, where it broke to pieces with a loud crash.

"Oh! my lord, what do you mean?" asked I.

"Hush, Hester," answered my lord, grasping me by the wrist, and drawing me towards him. "Listen to me; go into the great hall."

"I cannot leave you alone, my lord," said I. "Let me call Abel first."

"Curse Abel. Do as I tell you. Go into the great hall where those dogs who have left me to die alone are swilling my liquor; go straight to the end window, and tell me what you see."

"The window that looks on the west wing?" asked I, with a shiver.

"What other is there, you fool. Quick! do my

bidding, or I will come back from the other world, if there be another world, and haunt you."

He loosened his grasp, and terrified out of my senses, I sped away; but ere I crossed the threshold, I turned back, and gazed for a moment as if fascinated by some spell. My lord was sitting up in bed, his features distorted with the agony he was enduring, and pointing with his finger to the door; the single candle that burned on the table hardly lighted up the room, and I could almost fancy that I saw shadowy forms in some of the dark corners. I stood thus for a moment, then once more the wind burst forth in all its mad violence. The branches of the old oaks grated against each other with a strange and ghastly sound, and I could almost have sworn that I heard flapping of wings, and strange unearthly laughter outside the casement.

"Go!" thundered my lord, and terror quickening my steps, I flew down the corridor and into the great hall.

I shall never forget the sight that met my eyes. The fire that had been blazing so brightly had now diminished down to a dull glow, whilst the flames of the candles in the heavy brass sconces which were fastened against the wall, had turned into mere threads of light, the roysterers were all collected together in a trembling group in the great bay window, and were gazing out into the night. Fearfully, I crept up to them, and peeped over their shoulders. The courtyard was one unbroken waste of snow, but the west wing, the terrible west wing, was a blaze of light, not the good honest light of oil, or candle, but a ghastly greenish glimmer, one which showed distinctly every feature of

the old Court. Every crack and crevice in the weather-beaten walls, each quaintly carved ornamentation of portal and casement, was bathed in that strange unholy light. Not a word was spoken by the spectators as they gazed with a feeling of weird fascination on the strange scene before them. Suddenly a carriage, all draped in crape, drawn by four coal-black horses, rolled noiselessly up to the main entrance of the west wing, and, terrified as I was, I remember wondering why the wheels and the horses' feet left no tracks in the pure snow.

Then all at once the silence was broken, and a voice like a trumpet-call resounded "We wait."

Immediately the great doors of the west wing flew open, and a crowd of weird figures appeared, bearing amongst them a struggling figure, frantically striving for freedom. In a moment it was thrust into the carriage; I saw a masked form on the box gather up the reins; the horses started, and in a moment the whole scene vanished like a dream, and all that could be seen was the dark front of the Court frowning down upon the snow.

A wild shriek from the wounded man's chamber made us fly thither, and there we found my lord lying on the oaken planks near the door, literally bathed in blood, with a look of unutterable horror on his face. We lifted him up, but he was quite dead.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COMING OF THE HEIR.

After my lord's death, old lawyer Blenkinsop from Deepborough, came over, and, by order of the executors, placed seals on various cabinets and closets, in which articles of value were stowed away. All the silver plate, the racing cups that my lord had won, and the great salver which had been presented to him by the Yeomanry, were carted off to the bankers. The gamekeepers, and one or two of the outdoor men were retained, but all the rest of the servants received their dismissal and a month's wages, with the exception of Abel and myself, who were left to take charge of the Court, and a handsome allowance for doing so was made us.

The old place seemed very sad and lonely, and a great deal too large for us, now that we were left alone in it. All the reception-rooms were closed, and the furniture covered over with brown holland bags, and I often used to fancy that I could hear strange noises, and the echo of footsteps in the great dreary rooms. Abel and I had pleasant enough quarters in the steward's room near the kitchen, and I used to confine myself to that part of the house as much as possible, sometimes

creeping out on to the terrace that overlooked the low garden to get a little sun. But it was in the winter time that I felt the dreariness of my position the most, when the snow lay in one white unbroken sheet over moor and fell, and when the winds howled and raved round the Court, whistling through the shattered windows in the west wing, and coming with a rush and a burst against the panes of glass in my own room, making me start up from my knitting, half believing that something uncanny was striving to gain admittance.

For ten weary years this kind of life went on, and we heard but little of the doings of the outside world, for people were shy of coming up to the great house, which somehow or other had got a bad name, and my poor Abel was no gadabout, but preferred his pipe and mug by his own fireside to the noisy revelry of the "Seven Stars." This much, however, we had gathered, that Captain Fotheringham was greatly blamed for the part he had played, and had had to give up his commission in the Guards, and that my lady, having been shown the cold shoulder at Court, had left England, and had gone to live in some foreign country where all the people were poor benighted Papists, taking her boy with her.

Later on we got news that the captain had followed her there, and that they had been married, but of this we never received any confirmation.

After twelve years of this solitary existence, my poor Abel fell sick and died. I don't know quite what was the matter with him, and the doctor seemed puzzled

over his case, but though I tried all the recipes in my mother's book (and she had been a noted herb-woman in her day), he faded slowly away, and at last I was left all alone in the world. When the trustees heard of my loss they behaved very kindly, and offered me a pension and leave to go and live where I liked, but somehow I could not make up my mind to go far away from the spot where my poor Abel's bones were resting, and so I chose to stay on, and keep the great house with the aid of my little maid Hannah.

Now the old place seemed more eerie, and the dark shadows in the passages and corridors deeper and more gloomy than ever. The rats, too, grew bolder, and would often startle me with their wild rushes along the passages, and the noise they made behind the wainscoting. My old cat Peter would sometimes go out after them, but he generally came tearing back with his hair all standing up on end, and his tail swollen as big as two, frightening me out of my life, for I have always believed that cats and dogs can see things to which our eyes are closed.

Nine more dreary years passed, and one morning I got a letter from London ; a very unusual thing it was, the first time, indeed, that such a thing had happened to me. I took my spectacles out of the Bible, where I used to keep them for convenience sake, and putting them on, sat down to read it. When I had mastered its contents, I was truly astonished. It was from old Sir Tivy Trumpington, one of the trustees, and it told me that the young master was in London, and would come down to live at the Court at the end of the week.

For a short time I was clean dazed, but there was much work to be done, and little time to do it in. I sent one of the helpers down to the village, and I soon had four stout wenches up, who plied mop and broom with hearty goodwill. We soon had the reception rooms cleaned out and arranged, and then turned our attention to the bedchambers. I could not help thinking that my lady's room looked rather bare, and I was casting about for some means of hiding the walls, the paper of which was much faded, when I heard a voice behind me saying:

"Well, Mistress Kershaw, it do look purely grand, but don't you think a pair of looking-glasses, with crockery frames, would set off them niches fine?"

I turned round, and saw Will Fenton, the head keeper, who, having heard a rumour of the young lord's return, had hurried up to the Court to learn if it was true.

"What looking-glasses are you talking of, Will?" asked I. "You did give me such a turn coming on me so suddenly."

"Them in the west wing, mistress," answered he.

"The west wing," repeated I; "how do you know anything about that?"

"Don't you recollect when a chimney fell through the roof, and there was a slater fellow patching of it up? Well, I went up the ladder to have a crack wi' him, and just by way of a joke we went all through, and precious fine things there wor in the rooms, but all a-dropping to pieces, and I minds them pair of looking-glasses fine."

I thought over the matter for a moment, and felt that there could be no harm in getting these mirrors, for I had set my heart on making the place look pretty, so I asked Will if he were afraid to come with me into the west wing and show me where the glasses were.

"Surely not, mistress," answered he with a grin. "I ain't afeard of either boggart or bogle by day; yon folk only come out at night."

Telling him to call two of the gardeners to help him, I went to get the keys, and in five minutes more we were all assembled at the entrance to the west wing. The lock worked very stiffly, but after some little trouble we managed to open it, and pushing back the door, entered the deserted wing. The place looked grim and desolate, and the plaster, which had fallen from the walls and ceilings, had formed little heaps on the floor. There was a feeling of intense damp, which seemed to freeze the very marrow in one's bones. The balustrades of the great staircase were cracked and broken; the wide grate was a mass of rust, and the spiders' webs hung like smoky curtains in every corner.

"The boggarts must have queer tastes to stay here, mistress," whispered Will Fenton. "Happen they only comes up here at night to cool themselves after sitting over the fire all day."

"What fire do you mean?" asked I.

"Down yonder," answered the man, with a grin, striking the butt end of his gun upon the floor.

I could not repress a shudder, but bidding him not talk nonsense, but show me where the mirrors were, I

began cautiously to ascend the rickety stairs that led to the first floor. Directly I reached it and entered the first room on my right I started back in horror. The room was a bedchamber, with a huge old four-post bedstead in it, still covered with a mouldering quilt, and at the sound of my footsteps I distinctly saw it heave and quiver.

"Don't be afeard, mistress," said Will, kindly, "yon's nobbut rats," and stepping forward he struck the bed with the barrel of his gun, and true enough, I saw half a dozen of the nasty creatures jump out and scuttle off in dismay.

After this you may be sure I made as much haste as I could, and soon had the mirrors and a few other articles of furniture in decent preservation, removed, which made quite a fine show in the room that I was arranging. I was glad enough to get out of such an eerie place, and so I think was Will Fenton, for all his swaggering airs, and the west wing was once again left to its ghostly tenants.

Some three days after this I saw a coach heavily laden with luggage roll up the avenue, and with a cry of warning to the other servants, I hastened to the main entrance to receive the visitors. As it drew up at the front door, I stepped forward and made my best curtsey, when, much to my surprise, the door was flung open and a gentleman sprang out. I saw at once that this could not be my lord, for he was full forty years of age, and had a quantity of black hair on his upper lip, such as no English gentleman would think of wearing; besides, his skin was very dark, and he had all the ways

of an outlandish foreigner. Directly he set eyes on me he called me by my name as pat as you please.

"Are you Madame Kershaw, the housekeeper?"

"Mistress Kershaw, an' it please you," answered I, for I have no taste for foreign titles.

"'Tis all the same," returned he, looking at me so wickedly out of his bold, black eyes, that I could not help feeling a bit frightened. "Well, look here," he continued, speaking in such good English that I wondered where a poor benighted foreigner as he evidently was could have picked it up. "Your lord and lady are tired; is all ready for their reception?"

"My lady!" stammered I, hardly able to believe my ears.

"Sapremente! do I not speak your tongue plainly? Did you not know that your lord had taken to himself a wife?"

Before I could say a word, a little delicate-looking man, muffled up in a fur cloak, crawled out of the coach, and, flourishing a gold-headed cane over his head, exclaimed in a cracked voice, "I've heard of you before, old woman Kershaw; why do you not bid me welcome? Vassals, behold your rightful lord!"

Then the poor little fellow was taken with such a fit of coughing that I thought he would have died on the spot; but the foreign man, who seemed to have all his wits about him, whipped a bottle of smelling-salts out of his pocket, and speedily stopped that.

"Why will my lord expose himself to this damp air?" said he. "Go inside, my lord, whilst I hand out Lady Moreton."

But Lord Moreton, for it was evidently he, struck his cane violently on the ground, and exclaimed, in tones of real or pretended anger, "Stephani, I have always told you that you foreigners are utterly ignorant of the commonest rules of society. Learn then, Doctor Stephani, that when an English nobleman comes to his ancestral home for the first time, he, and he only, introduces his wife to the household, and does not delegate the duty to his hired dependents."

The foreigner shrugged his shoulders, and stood aside, with a sneer on his lip. My lord turned to the coach door, and, offering his hand, the prettiest creature that I ever saw in my life got slowly out. She was tall, with beautiful brown hair, and the softest pair of blue eyes that you would see in a long summer's day.

"There, Mother Kershaw," said my lord, giving her a little push towards me, "that is Lady Moreton, take her to her room, and send up some wine and something to eat for the doctor and I, at once. Bid the men unpack the coach. Let Doctor Stephani and I have two rooms opening one into the other, and take Lady Moreton to the chamber you have prepared for her"; and then he turned and spoke a few words to his companion in a foreign tongue, and, with a low bow, in which there was more of mockery than politeness, he swaggered off, followed by the doctor, whom I shrewdly suspected to be an Italian papist.

Lady Moreton looked at me attentively for a moment, and I could see a tear sparkle in her eye. "And so," said she, "you are Hester Kershaw; I like your face, and I have no doubt but that we shall be great friends."

CHAPTER V.

LADY MORETON'S BETROTHAL.

FAR away on the western coast of Italy is a little town nestling beneath a giant mountain, with the waves of the pure blue sea gently rippling against its silver sands. Above, the sky is of one uniform torquoise hue, and the lofty pines, that fling their dark shadows on the mountain ridges, seem like giant sentinels placed to guard an earthly paradise from the intrusion of the profane. The brilliant white of the houses is relieved by the vivid green of the venetian blinds, whilst the tall *campaniles* rising here and there break the dull uniformity of the squarely-built residences. A little fleet of fishing boats is drawn up on the sand, and groups of red-capped fishermen lounge idly about, while others collect in knots, and with loud outcries and strange gesticulations, play the national game of *morra*. At some little distance from the town are a few villas embowered in foliage, and chiefly tenanted by English families, who have chosen this spot, so richly endowed by nature, as a place of sojourn. It was in one of these villas that my earliest years were passed, and here I first began to notice events that took place around me. My father was the Honourable Gervase

Trentham, a man of good family, but who had, by his insensate passion for the gaming-table, run through all he possessed, and was existing in this lonely little Italian town on an allowance of three hundred a year, which was made to him by his wife's brother, Humphrey Craddock, an opulent merchant in the city of London. My poor mother had belonged to a rich trading family, and had been captivated by the handsome face of Gervase Trentham, and at last yielded to his solicitations, and eloped with him to Gretna Green, where they were married. For a time they lived a life of fashionable frivolity, as long as my mother's fortune of twenty thousand pounds lasted; but the gaming-table and the dissipations of society soon exhausted it, and shortly after my birth my poor mother died of a broken heart. Her relations offered to take charge of me, but my father affected the deepest regard for me, and refused to part with me, although my uncle, Humphrey Craddock, made him the most liberal offers if he would consent to give up his guardianship of me. After much correspondence, and several excessively stormy interviews, my father retired with me to the little Italian town of San Crusado, upon an allowance generously made him by my uncle, on the understanding that a report of my health should be forwarded weekly to London. It may appear strange that I should be in possession of all these facts, and unnatural that I should speak in the terms I do of my father. With regard to the first, I derived all my information from his papers and diaries, which fell into my hands after his death; and, concerning the second, he never showed

me any parental affection, and I believe simply tolerated me because of the annual income he received on my account. When I was about seven years of age, an English lady, accompanied by her son, a boy about ten years old, took one of the vacant villas in the neighbourhood of San Crusado. Of course my father called upon his compatriot, and an intimacy speedily sprang up between them. The lady was Lady Moreton, who had recently lost her husband in a very tragical manner, and the little boy with her was the heir to the Moreton estates.

I remember how much I admired Lady Moreton's queenly style of beauty, but I could not help feeling chilled by her manner. She treated everyone with the same coldness, and it was only upon her son that she lavished all her tenderness, and seemed at such moments to become an altered woman. As for young Lord Moreton, I detested him almost from the first day I saw him. He was a puny, unhealthy child, and hated all kinds of physical exertion, whilst I had been accustomed to a free life in the open air, and had been taught by the fishermen to furl a sail, and handle the tiller. The characteristic of Lord Moreton which was most repugnant to me was his hideous cruelty to all things smaller and weaker than himself. Nothing pleased him more than to catch one of the village children, much younger than himself, and terrify it almost out of its senses by making hideous grimaces; and he would, if the opportunity served, proceed to even greater acts of cruelty. In one case the little daughter of the village flour-seller was missing, and,

after a long search, was discovered in a cave in the rocks, with its hands bound behind it, half dead from fear and exposure. The poor little thing could only say that something had pounced upon it, and, muffling its head in some thick woollen garment, had dragged it away. Young Moreton, whose habits were well known, got all the credit of this cowardly deed, and, though it could never be brought home to him, yet the elder brother of the child, a boy a little bigger than Lord Moreton, laid in wait for him and beat him most severely. Lady Moreton was frantic at her idolised son being treated in such a manner, and tried every means in her power to get the offender punished, but public feeling was against her, and she had to submit.

One day Lady Moreton came over to my father's house, and had a long consultation with him. I remember the day well, because she brought her boy with her, and he had a little riding-whip, with which he amused himself by flicking my hands and cheeks, which I bore for some time with patience, until at last, emboldened by my submission, he gave me so cruel a blow that my anger overcame me, and, snatching the whip from his hands, I broke it into half-a-dozen pieces, giving him at the same time so violent a push that he fell down and hurt his head on the gravel. It was piteous to see the state of abject terror into which he at once fell, and to hear his entreaties that I would not hurt him. I lifted him up, and we made friends, but this did not prevent his telling a garbled version of my conduct to his mother, which procured me a close

imprisonment in my room for forty-eight hours, on bread and water.

The result of this interview was that one of the best rooms in the villa was prepared for the reception of a guest, and a stock of wine and other delicacies was laid in by my father, the money for which was, I shrewdly suspect, furnished by Lady Moreton ; for, except my father, whose health, he said, necessitated his living well, our food at the villa was of the plainest kind. In a few days a very handsome gentleman made his appearance in the village, and came straight to my father's house, where he was evidently expected. He was undeniably handsome, but there was a careworn look about his eyes, and he had a habit of heaving deep-drawn sighs, which made me think that he had some secret sorrow on his mind. My father was, however, delighted at having some one to talk to who could give him all the news of the gay doings in London, for from that city Captain Fotheringham (for such was our visitor's name) had just come, and the two sat up drinking and talking nearly all night.

Next day it was the same, but I noticed that though Captain Fotheringham brightened up, and seemed merry enough in company, yet as soon as he was left alone the same feeling of depression appeared to seize upon him again, and to crush him down beneath its weight.

Lady Moreton never came to our house now, though my father frequently paid visits to her.

One day, as I was playing near Captain Fotheringham, he called me to him, and, turning back my curls,

looked earnestly at my face. "Trentham," said he, "the child will grow up very pretty; what do you intend to do with her? You will never get her a husband in this out-of-the-way hole."

"Oh! she'll get a husband easily enough," replied my father, carelessly. "She will have all her uncle Humphrey's money; an old curmudgeon, who will only give me three hundred a year for the trouble of keeping her."

"A strange thing for a man to grumble at, having to keep his own daughter," returned Captain Fotheringham, with a sneer.

"You may sneer," remarked my father; "but it is a precious hard thing for me to be tied here to look after a brat, when, if I only had a fair start again, I might pick up more than I lost."

"I see," laughed Fotheringham. "You have been the pigeon, and now want to play the hawk a bit."

"I don't know what you mean by hawks," answered my father, sulkily; "and I don't think that it is proper language for one gentleman to use to another; but I think that, as the girl will come into some two hundred thousand pounds——"

"What do you mean?" asked Fotheringham, eagerly.

"Pooh! man," answered my father, with a coarse laugh; "what are you thinking of? look at your age and hers."

"On my word, Trentham, you are a perfect fool at times," returned our guest frankly. "I was thinking of something quite different. There, dear, run away and play," added he, giving me a gentle push.

I obeyed him, but from the garden I could see him in deep conversation with my father.

Some days after this a very unusual event occurred. A splendid man-of-war sailed into the little bay, with the British flag flying, and, after anchoring, fired a gun evidently by way of signal. The poor fisher-folk were terribly alarmed, and many who thought that war had been declared, and that their town was going to be bombarded by the English, began to pack up their property, with the view of flying into the interior of the country. As soon, however, as the gun was fired, my father and Captain Fotheringham went down to the beach, and, after much trouble, prevailed on one of the fishermen to row them out to the strange vessel. I watched the boat dancing over the waves, and longed to be with them, when, to my surprise, I saw a large sailing-boat, which I knew belonged to Guiseppe Maldoni, one of the principal inhabitants of the village, making for the same goal, with Lady Moreton and her son on board. I stood watching the boats until they got alongside of the great ship, and then turned back to the villa. In about three hours' time the whole party came back together, and sat down to a collation which my father had ordered before he left the house.

Young Lord Moreton and I were sent out into the garden to play, and directly we were alone I began to ply him with questions. At first he was very sulky at having been sent away from the table, for even at that age he was very fond of wine, and would not answer any of my queries; but at last I coaxed him into telling me what had taken place.

"We all went down into a fine room in the ship, and a gentleman with a blut coat all over gold, and a cocked hat, read something out of a book, and then that man, who is staying at your house, kissed mamma, and she told me that he was my new papa, and then we had wine and sweetmeats."

"Why, they got married!" cried I, quite aghast.

"Of course they did, you little fool!" retorted he. "Everyone except you knew that they were going to be, but no one tells you anything, you are such a young jaby."

"Don't you call me names, if you please," returned I, for I felt deeply offended—I am sure I do not know why—at having been kept in ignorance of what was going on. "You are very rude, and I shall not stay out and play with you any more."

"Yes, come along, and let us go in," cried he. "Perhaps they won't notice us, and we shall get fruit and wine. Give me your hand, and I won't tell mamma how rude you have been to me."

It seemed to me that it was just the other way, but I was always anxious for peace and quietness, so I gave him my hand, and we walked back to the house. As we paused on the threshold of the dining-room, I saw my father, who was much excited, rise to his feet with a full glass in his hand, and call out in a loud tone of voice—"Here's to the health of the newly-married pair —long life and happiness to them."

Both Lady Moreton and Captain Fotheringham smiled, and when we came in, my father gave us both a glass of wine, and made us repeat the same words.

I hated wine myself, but I was too much afraid of my father to refuse to drink it. After this toast was over, Captain Fotheringham turned to Lady Moreton, and whispered something in her ear.

"Nonsense," said she, scornfully. "I don't believe a word of it"

Again the captain whispered to her, and I caught the words—"Two hundred thousand pounds."

"Come here, my dear boy," said she. "You know you always do as I bid you. You see dear little Gladys there? Would you not like to have her for your little wife?"

"What, have her all to myself? A wife belongs to her husband, doesn't she?" asked the imp.

"Certainly, my boy," said the captain.

"Then I could tease her, and ill-treat her as much as I like if she were my wife," said the boy.

"Oh! my dear child, you would not think of doing anything so wrong," broke in Lady Moreton. "Go, like a dear, and kiss your little wife."

"I won't be his little wife—I hate him!" cried I, my face growing crimson, as he came up and tried to kiss me; and I pushed him away with all my strength.

"Gladys!" thundered my father, in tones that I dreaded; for when alone a blow generally followed.

I felt cowed, and permitted the odious boy to touch my lips with his.

"What a sweet couple they make," said Lady Moreton.

"Yes;—rank and money," observed the captain, with a sneer.

"And the blessing of a loving father," observed mine, with a tear in his eye, for the wine he had taken had affected him a good deal.

We two children stood silent, not knowing what to make of it all, and this was my betrothal.

CHAPTER VI.

DOCTOR STEPHANI SPEAKS.

My name is Angelo Stephani, Bachelor of Medicine of the College of Padua, and I will challenge the world to produce a more miserably unlucky dog than I have been all my life. It is nothing but sheer nonsense to say that all that has occurred to me is a just punishment for what I have done. It is nonsense, and unchristian nonsense too; for of course, if there are places for reward and punishment hereafter, it stands to reason that a man is not punished in this world. Besides, I did no more than other people have done who are now flourishing and wealthy; but I will tell you what I did do, and that was the greatest sin of all—*I got found out.* I daresay you would like to know what it was that I did. Well, that is a matter between myself and my own conscience. I like to affect to have one, and I am not going to let anyone into the secrets of my past life. It is quite enough for me that I have been living a blameless life for the last three years, doctoring fishermen and their brats, and not disdaining to pull out a tooth if required. Perhaps it was because I liked it, perhaps because I had no opportunity to do otherwise. At any rate, it is no

concern of yours. I was miserably poor when I came to San Crusado, as assistant to old Doctor Felipe Schembroni, and I should have remained so if his old fool of a housekeeper had not brought him a bottle of poison from the surgery instead of the harmless essence he wanted, and finished him off. The old woman always asserted that someone had changed the position of the bottles, but when a woman gets old she is not to be trusted, or a young one either, for the matter of that.

When I first settled down here, there were two English families that caused me some amusement. An ex-lady of title married to a swaggering ex-captain, who had no doubt been turned out of his regiment for some misconduct; and an ex-fine gentleman-about-town, who had come over here because he couldn't pay the bets he had made in horse-racing, an unpardonable sin amongst the English. These two men treated me with the utmost haughtiness, but it wasn't my game to resent it; and little by little I managed to make myself so useful to the ex-lady of title, by curing her beast of a boy of a fever, that I got to be on better terms with the men. Th e clumsy islanders were playing a little game amongst themselves, which they thought they were working out very diplomatically, but which anyone with half a grain of sense could see through. The ex-fashionable man had a daughter, who had expectations of two hundred thousand English pounds. *Cospetto!* how a sum like that makes my mouth water. And the ex-lady of title had a son, with what these English call a handle to his name, and a lot of barren acres at

home in his foggy island; and these three dunderheads were doing all they could to make up a match between the children. The girl was pretty, but had no will of her own; the boy—if I could possibly have cared for anything on this earth, I should have adored, he was so perfectly wicked—he was treacherous, a liar, an awful coward, and loved wickedness for its own sake. He used to come to me for two hours a day to study, and I flatter myself I did teach him a few things. He affected to treat me with the greatest contempt. I, his superior in intellect, appearance, manners, and birth—well, I don't know about the latter, for old Geronimo Stephani, my lamented progenitor, was a few years back tugging an oar at the galleys. But the poor boy had been taught to look upon all foreigners as far beneath him, and I let him have his own way. Well, to make a long story short, I got such influence over him, that whilst he thought I was his most humble dependent, I could twist him round my little finger.

The young fool didn't want to marry the girl, but I soon showed him what two hundred thousand pounds meant, and after a while he was willing enough. His fine lady mother never knew how much I helped her plans; but at any rate, when the girl was seventeen, and the young lord nineteen, the marriage ceremony was performed by a heretic priest that was taking a tour through the country. If one could pity anything so utterly insignificant as a woman, I could have felt sorry for the girl, for she evidently hated the fine bridegroom, as the priests say a certain gentleman does holy water, which I daresay is a fabrication after all;

but she was in deadly fear of her father, and so went through the ceremony like a little fool who saw no way out of it. *Per bacco!* I would have married the girl myself if it had not been for a certain Vittoria Benoni, *in Livorno*, who has the folly to assert (backed, I allow, by documentary evidence) that I was her husband. But I hoped to get my share of the two hundred thousand pounds in another way. Well, my poor sweet young pupil was left an unhappy orphan sooner than he expected, for the ex-officer and his wife, going out for a sail in the bay, a sudden squall upset their boat, and they didn't come ashore for three days, and then in such a condition that it was as well to put them out of sight as soon as possible. My pupil showed some little emotion over this catastrophe, declaring that the fishermen who had found the bodies had stolen his mother's watch and rings, which I daresay they had.

But there was a fresh blow coming, which really was something to grieve at. One day the ex-man-about-town came tearing into the house with an open letter in his hand, raving like a madman. Well, after we got him a little calmed down, it seemed that Uncle Humphrey Craddock had lost some ships, or a bank had broken, or stocks had gone down, and he was utterly ruined, so farewell to the chance of the two hundred thousand pounds!

I couldn't help laughing at the way my pupil took it —like a brave fellow. He first was about to vent his disappointment on his wife, but I pointed out a scheme by which he could recoup himself for his loss, and which

we could carry out if I went with him to England. I was the more anxious to do this as I had found out, that, after all, the barren acres yielded some eight thousand pounds per annum. This was agreed to, and Lord and Lady Moreton, with Doctor Angelo Stephani, family physician, set sail for England in a month's time, leaving papa-in-law behind, to whom my pupil promised a hundred a year as long as he remained at San Crusado, where, as I pointed out, he would soon drink himself to death.

CHAPTER VII.

HESTER KERSHAW'S NARRATIVE.

I WAS thoroughly dazed and dumbfounded, as may well be imagined, at the strange behaviour of my lord, and at the traces of sorrow that I saw in my lady's sweet face, but I accompanied her to her room, and she was pleased to say that I had made all the arrangements very prettily indeed.

"And this, my lady," said I, opening a door, "is his lordship's dressing-room. I see that he has brought no man with him, so shall I order his trunks to be brought up here, and unpack his clothes myself?"

A faint pink flush rose to my lady's cheek.

"No, Hester," said she, "you must not trouble about that. Lord Moreton is a great invalid, and has constant need of the attendance of his physician, so that he will lie in the room next to him. You have seen him—Doctor Stephani, I mean."

And, as she uttered the words, she heaved a deep sigh.

"What! is that black-a-vised foreigner a doctor, my lady?" asked I. "I have no faith in such outlandish cattle myself, and wonder that my lord does not have a good honest English physician. Why, there

is old Doctor Pasmore's son, who is worth a dozen of such Papistical idolators."

Again my lady heaved a deep sigh.

"Lord Moreton has every confidence in Doctor Stephani's skill, who has known him from childhood. But let us change the subject. What a grand old place this is, Hester, and how lovely the hills and moors look at this time of the year. But the house must be terribly bleak and drear in the winter. Pray, is there a ghost in it?"—and she gave a little shiver as she spoke.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her all about the west wing, but fortunately I restrained myself.

"A ghost, my lady!" repeated I, forcing a laugh. "Oh, no; we don't have such things at Moreton Court. You may hear strange sounds at night, for the old wood does creak and groan sadly at times; and when there is any wind, it seems to find its way inside the house and shrieks and whistles down the corridors, but you must not be frightened at that."

"But I shall be frightened, Hester," returned she, "so, please, just have a bed put up for yourself in the dressing-room, for I seem to be miles away from the inhabited part of the house, and if you were close at hand I should not be a bit nervous, for you are so brave."

I brave, indeed! If she had only known how I and my little maid Hannah used to sit quivering and shaking at the least noise, and always imagining we could hear footsteps coming along the passages, and ghostly fingers fumbling with the latch, she would not

have thought me so brave after all, poor lamb. "Well, your ladyship," said I, "if you can do without me for a little time, I will send some of the maids up with the bed, and then come back, and help your ladyship to unpack."

"Don't be long, Hester," said the poor young thing, "for I tell you I don't half like being left alone here."

After I had given the necessary order to the maids, and was telling the new cook to look up a little something tasty for her ladyship's supper, I heard the bell from my lord's study pealing away at a great rate. Why it was called the study, I never knew. In the old lord's time the guns used to be kept there, and his fly books, and medicines for the horses, but very little studying went on there, though there were three or four shelves full of old sermons, and Latin books, a great many of the leaves of which had been torn out for gun waddings. As the bell continued to ring furiously, I thought it best to answer it myself, and when I got into the room, I saw that my lord was already a little "how came you so"; but I took no notice of that, for a good many gentlemen, aye, and magistrates too, used to take a drop too much, and it was only poor servants, and labouring men, that it behoved to keep themselves sober, except, of course, at revels, and patterns, where they might take a drop as well as their betters.

"Well, old woman Kershaw," said my lord, the moment I entered the room, "how is it that only two bottles of port were sent up to me; do you call that proper respect to your master? Do you see

that man there? He is a poor-benighted Italian that I am trying to teach to behave like an English gentleman; he has never tasted anything but the thin sour wines of his native country, and how do you think that I am to do so with only two bottles of port? Send up half a dozen; unless your old thief of a husband has drunk all the wine in the cellar."

I perfectly knew my duty, and the respect that I owed to my master; but I could not bear to hear my poor Abel slandered now that he was lying in his grave. "My lord," said I, "my husband was an honest man, and would have died sooner than have touched anything that did not belong to him; and as for your having more port you will pardon me, as an old servant who has served the Moretons all her life, if I say that you have already had as much as is good for you."

"Why, you old——" began my lord, putting his hands on the arms of his chair, and striving to rise from his seat.

"*Basta*" (which I afterwards learned meant enough) said the foreign doctor, hastily, and then he added a few more words in the same tongue which made my lord sink back again into his seat. "Mistress Kershaw is quite right, he continued in the most oily manner, these strong heady drinks do not suit either of us; bring up some claret, good mistress, and for pity's sake something to eat, for I am nearly famished."

Nearly famished! I could hardly believe my ears, there was as fine a piece of cold roast beef upon the table, as you could see in a day's march, a pigeon pie,

and a juicy ham; famished, indeed! Then what must he have been accustomed to?

"What will you please to want, sir, besides what is already before you?" asked I.

"I cannot eat raw meat like a dog, good Mistress Kershaw," said he, with a glance at the beef, which was a little underdone, as it should be for an English gentleman's table, "or any of those pretty little pigeons which it is a shame and a sin to kill, nor any of that pig, for in my country we do not think it very wholesome. No, let me have some nice cool green salad, and a clove of garlic, and some oil; then with your delicious bread I can make a really good meal." I could hardly believe my eyes, when the nasty fellow rubbed the garlic into his bread, smeared it all over with oil, and eat large mouthfuls of it with his salad—haugh! it nearly made me sick, but all these foreigners have such nasty ways about them.

In spite of all the doctor said, however, my lord would have another bottle of port, and, I suppose, fuddled himself completely; for in about an hour the bell was rung for one of the men to come and help to put his master to bed. I do not hold with servants carrying tales, but I felt it my duty to tell my lady; but she told me that this was no uncommon occurrence, and that though Doctor Stephani did all that he could to stop him, my lord nearly every night of his life took a great deal more wine than was good for him. That night I lay in the little dressing-room adjoining my lady's chamber, and in the morning we were both up

with the lark, for I had promised my lady to take her all over the grounds, and show her the dove cote, and the poultry yard. As we passed down the corridor in which my lord's chamber was, we could hear him snoring, and in the court-yard, by the fountain, we found Doctor Stephani smoking, not an honest clay pipe, or even a cigar, as some of the quality use, but some rubbish of tobacco, done up in a roll of thin paper, which he made very handily. He wished us a grave "good morning," and removed his hat politely enough, but we hurried past him, for I had from the first taken a dislike to him, and I don't think that he was a great favourite with my lady.

We had a delightful ramble, and I took great pleasure in showing my lady all over the farmyard and grounds; for now that she was removed from the saddening influence which the Court seemed to cast over every one beneath its roof, she was as merry as a cricket, and took the greatest delight in feeding the poultry, and looking at the swans gliding gracefully over the surface of the lake in the park.

We saw but little of my lord. Large cases containing books arrived from London, and he and Doctor Stephani were poring over their contents all day, then one of the rooms was fitted up as what they called a laboratory. A big fire was kept burning there day and night, and as far as I could learn they were trying experiments, not very nice ones I should think; for the smells that came from it were enough to knock one down, and one day there was a rattle, and a bang in it, which shattered the windows in the room, and made my lord, whose

hands were scorched and his hair singed, howl wofully.

My lady was good enough to talk to me a great deal, and told me, after a time, that she was a very unhappy woman; that my lord was most unkind to her, and if he came near her it was to pinch her as hard as he could under pretence of giving her his arm, and such like; that in coming down from London he had kept kicking her shins, and apologising under the plea that he had fallen asleep, and did not know what he was doing.

Doctor Stephani, she told me, always reproved him sternly when he caught him at any of these tricks, when he would cringe and turn away like a beaten hound; but for all that she could not bear the doctor, and she was very much afraid of him. I could well believe her story, for my lord was horribly cruel to animals. For a long time I could not imagine why so many of my fowls died, until I found that my lord was in the habit of catching them slyly, and sticking a pin into them under the feathers, so that they might linger in agony for days. Once I caught him in the kitchen, thrusting at my cat—not Peter, for he had died long ago—which had taken refuge under the dresser, with a red-hot poker. I pretended not to know who it was, and had my lord by the collar in no time, when he looked very foolish, and half inclined to cry, whilst the poor cat scampered off, with the fur all scorched and smoking in more than one place.

One day, after my lord and lady had been at the Court for about a month, I was in the dressing-room arrang-

ing some clean linen on the shelves of a cupboard, when my lord came into my lady's chamber, and, thinking her alone, began his usual tricks. "And how is my dear little wifie?" said he; "her poor hubby has been so anxious about her."

"You have not appeared very anxious," returned Lady Moreton, "for I have seen nothing of you for a week."

"I have been ill, light of my eyes," said his lordship. Come, give me a little kiss."

"When last I came near you, you pinched my arm until it was black and blue," answered his wife, with a little catching of the breath that sounded like a sob.

"It was an accident, my treasure; well, at any rate, let me kiss your hand."

I suppose my lady permitted him to do so, for a moment afterwards I heard her scream out, "Oh you monster! you have bitten my finger."

"It was an accident, heart's delight; these polished oak floors are so cursed slippery, and I missed my footing," returned Lord Moreton.

I now thought it was time to show myself, and so knocked at the door of the dressing-room, which communicated with the bedroom.

"Come in," said my lady, and I entered.

"What, you here?" asked my lord.

"Yes, my lord," replied I, with a meaning glance, "I have been here for the last ten minutes."

My lord appeared rather disconcerted at this, but after a few moments, as if he were repeating a lesson,

told my lady to prepare for a trip to London, as they would set off next day. "To London!" repeated my mistress in surprise; "am *I* to go to London?"

"Yes," snarled my lord; "but not for balls and theatres, and such things. They all cost money, and I have none to spare since your uncle Craddock cheated me out of your fortune."

"How dare you say such a thing, when you know that it is untrue?" returned my lady, with a little stamp of her foot.

"There, then, don't be a vixen," said my lord, turning pale, and taking a step backwards, "but get ready to go up to town to-morrow; it is a matter of business only, and we shall not be long there."

As soon as we were left alone, my lady and I exchanged glances of dismay. "Oh! Hester," said she, "I fear that there is some bad design concealed beneath this trip."

I tried to soothe her, but in my heart I agreed with her. However, the next day they started, accompanied by Doctor Stephani, and I was once more left alone at Moreton Court.

CHAPTER VIII.

LADY MORETON INTERVENES.

We had a long and dreary journey to London, and Lord Moreton, who displayed more meanness than usual, was engaged in constant wrangles with the ostlers and the postboys, which made the journey most unpleasant. In the intervals of these scenes he got to complaining of me to Doctor Stephani, saying that I was not *sympatica*, and bringing all sorts of accusations against me. The doctor espoused my cause warmly, and reproved Lord Moreton for his behaviour, which at the same time he endeavoured to excuse to me upon the plea that his lordship's health was not all that could be desired, and that, doubtless, as he grew better, those fits of peevishness would pass away entirely. I do not know what to think of Doctor Stephani. Outwardly, he is all deference and courtesy to me, and he invariably takes my part against Lord Moreton, but sometimes his glance rests upon me in a way that makes me shudder, and a cold feeling of repulsion, similar to that I felt when I nearly stepped upon a viper in the park at Moreton Court, comes over me. He is a man who, I am sure, would let nothing stand in the way of his attaining an object; and an object he

must have, or else he would not permit himself to be buried alive in a place like Moreton Court; nor would he put up with the petty insults that Lord Moreton seems to delight to heap upon him. Our journey passed without incident, save an alarm of highwaymen in the North Road, near Enfield. My unhappy husband; wept profusely, and cried for mercy, but the doctor sprang out of the carriage with a pistol in each hand, and showed so bold a front that the two horsemen, who were hovering around our chaise in a rather suspicious manner, thought it best to ride off, and the doctor, returning his pistols to their receptacle, calmly proceeded to extricate Lord Moreton from the place of refuge which he had selected beneath the seat of the carriage. After this little mishap we arrived peaceably in London, and, much to my astonishment, Lord Moreton instead of putting up at the hotel in a fashionable quarter where we had stayed when we passed through there before, ordered the postboys to drive to a rambling old inn in Holborn, where he selected a dreary suite of rooms, which looked out upon a dull yard at the back. As soon as our trunks were placed in our respective rooms, Lord Moreton begged me not to leave the inn until his return, and went out with the doctor, not coming back until it was quite dark. The next day they took me out with them, and getting a hackney coach, we were driven to the houses of several physicians in the more genteel part of the town, whom Lord Moreton said he had to consult regarding his health. I thought it very strange that he should take me to these houses with him, and

still more so, that they should pay so much attention to me, and ask me so many questions regarding my age, and general health ; but Doctor Stephani told me that this was to see if I was strong enough to take charge of his lordship, whose health was in a most precarious state. After a long and rather fatiguing day, we returned to the dreary old inn, and for the next few days I was not allowed to go out. I say not allowed, because Lord Moreton and the doctor never left the house together now ; and that if I wished to take the air when my husband was on guard, for I can call it nothing else, he begged me to remain with him ; whilst, when he was absent, I had an instinctive feeling that Doctor Stephani would follow me should I venture to leave the house during his turn of duty. My heart sank within me when I noticed all these precautions, the reason for which I was at a loss to account. There were times when I felt that life was not worth living for, and longed to be out of the strife and turmoil of the battle. It was the feeling that I was threatened by some sort of unknown danger that haunted me the most, that some kind of net was slowly encompassing me around, and that every step I took was beset with traps and pitfalls, I was very young, and so utterly friendless. My uncle Humphrey who, I believe, loved me, was a ruined man, and even if he had not been so, I had no means of communicating with him. When I let my thoughts dwell upon my future my heart sank within me, so blank and drear did it all seem.

The long confinement to the house was telling upon my health and spirits, and I think that I should have

become dangerously ill, had not Lord Moreton signified to me that our stay in London was drawing to a close, and that I was to accompany him to the city the next morning. Accordingly we drove through the crowded streets, and under any other circumstances, I should have enjoyed a sight, at once so strange and so new, of crowds of men hurrying to and fro, all inspired by the same object, that of gaining money.

We visited several large establishments, which I presumed were banking-houses, for there were quantities of busy clerks in them, but after sending in our names, we were invariably ushered into a private room, where there was much examining of documents, and several times I had to sign my name, which I did without knowing or caring the reason for my doing so.

After this business we drove back to the inn, and I remember Lord Moreton hurt me severely by pretending to stumble as he assisted me out of the coach, and crushing me up against the sharp edge of the door-frame. The moment we got into our private sitting-room my husband rushed up to Doctor Stephani, who had not accompanied us, and pulling out the papers that I had signed, from his bosom, danced insanely round the room screeching out in Italian, "She has done it, all is right."

A savage look from the doctor put a speedy stop to his ecstacy, and looking a little foolish, Lord Moreton returned the papers to his bosom. I retired to my room early that evening, as we were to start first thing the next morning by mail coach, Lord Moreton's fear of highwaymen not permitting him to travel again in

a private postchaise, as he thought that he would be safer in a public conveyance. Our trunks were therefore sent off by waggon, and the next morning we took our seats in the Highflyer coach, which passed through the village which lay just outside the park walls of Moreton Court. The day was excessively fine, and Doctor Stephani, who had contracted a vile habit of smoking, had taken an outside seat. There were two gentlemen inside, and my lord was soon wearied of being in my society when he could not annoy or hurt me. He therefore took advantage of the first stoppage for the purpose of changing horses, to take a vacant place on the outside, by his medical adviser. I was, to a certain extent, glad to be alone, and as my two companions seemed to be staid and gentlemanly men, I abandoned myself to my own thoughts which were sad enough, although I was pleased at the notion of getting back again to dear old Hester Kershaw, whose presence I felt was in some sort a safeguard to me. Wrapped up in my own reflections, I took little notice of the conversation that my fellow-travellers were carrying on in a low tone, until a name which was very familiar to me fell on my ear.

"That was a strange affair of Humphrey Craddock's," said one.

"I don't know what you call strange," retorted the other, "when a man won't insure his ships, and they get lost at sea, there seems nothing strange in his being ruined."

"The 'Castle of Leith' was one of the ships that was lost, was it not?"

"It was."

"How came it then that the 'Castle of Leith' was at anchor off Belen Castle six months ago—owner's name David Armstrong, who, if you recollect, was Craddock's confidential clerk, and that the 'Mexican Emperor,' another of his vessels, was sold at Havre, after discharging a valuable cargo of cochineal?"

"But these are not facts, are they?"

"Both these instances are within my personal knowledge."

"Then the scoundrel must have defrauded his creditors."

"You forget that Humphrey Craddock paid twenty shillings in the pound two days after he was adjudicated bankrupt."

"So he did, at least the money was paid to his creditors by a third party."

"By the identical David Armstrong, and what do you conclude from that?"

"That he simply wanted, for some reason or other, to get out of business, and used the pretext of a false, though perfectly honourable bankruptcy to do so."

"Then you think that the story of his embarrassments was entirely false."

"I am sure of it, and I expect that even after settling with all his creditors in full, Humphrey Craddock must be worth four hundred thousand pounds at the very least."

"Where is he living then?"

"He is living at Bath, and says that he has received help from a fellow called Trentham, who married his

sister, and ran through all his money; the very last man I should expect to help Craddock in his troubles."

I could restrain myself no longer, but broke in on their conversation. "Gentlemen," exclaimed I, impulsively, "will you give me Humphrey Craddock's address."

Both started with surprise at being thus accosted. "Really, madam," said one of them. "I do not see what you can want with such information, and though we are in a public conveyance, yet the conversation between my friend and myself, was a private one."

"Gentlemen," repeated I, earnestly, "pray give me the information I require, I am Lady Moreton, my maiden name was Trentham, and I am the niece of Humphrey Craddock."

The two gentlemen whispered together for a moment, and then the one who had appeared to be the best informed, took upon himself to reply. "My lady," said he, "I was aware that my old friend, Humphrey Craddock's niece was married to a Lord Moreton, and I tell you candidly, that this news had, I am sure, much to do with his subsequent strange proceedings. That he will be glad to hear of you, however, I am certain, and here is his address," as he spoke he handed to me a card upon which some words were written in pencil, "but pray use the information that I have given you with discretion."

"Sir," returned I, "be sure that I shall do so. It may be that I shall shortly require the services of a true friend, and I am sure that I shall find that in my uncle Humphrey. And now one more word, we shall

shortly, I suppose, stop again to change horses, and Lord Moreton will no doubt come inside again : pray do not allude to what has passed between us, for a moment."

"Lady Moreton," replied the gentleman who had last addressed me, " we ourselves are about to get out at the next stage, but be sure that your request shall be attended to."

I thanked both him and his companion warmly, and after secreting the card in my bosom, bade them farewell.

At the next stage, Lord Moreton got in, smelling very strong of spirits, and after grumbling a little, in his usual fashion, fell asleep, and did not wake again until we pulled up at the "Seven Stars" at Moreton village, where, to my inexpressible joy, Hester Kershaw was waiting to receive me.

CHAPTER IX.

A LESSON IN TOXICOLOGY.

SOME six weeks after their return from London, Lord Moreton and Doctor Stephani were sitting in the room at Moreton Court, known as the study. Though the weather was still warm, a fire of oaken billets blazed on the hearth, for Lord Moreton was constitutionally chilly, and the doctor was accustomed to a far warmer climate. There was wine on the table, and a porcelain basket filled with fine fruit. Lord Moreton, according to his custom, filled his glass rapidly, and drank it off with equal celerity; while the doctor swallowed the wine slowly, and appeared to take a pleasure in allowing the rich bouquet to cling to his palate.

"I wish to heaven you would speak out, Stephani," cried Lord Moreton, in accents of the greatest impatience, "you are so cursed cold-blooded, no dash or go in you."

"Surely, my lord," returned Stephani, "you are alluding to the characteristics of a Briton, the popularly accepted character of a child of the sunny south is that he is all fire and dash."

"I don't care a hang about accepted ideas," retorted

his lordship, sullenly, "all I want to know is when we are to come to the knowledge of the great secret, and learn how to make the pure carbon, which forms the diamond."

"The furnace lacks fuel," replied the Italian, laconically.

"And yet enough has been thrown into it since we began work."

"If we had only half of the legacy that the Signor Craddock was going to leave to Miladi," remarked the doctor, "we should achieve a perfect success."

"You know the old fool ruined himself, and that the legacy is all moonshine, now; but how about that fine plan of yours which sent us up to London, and made us spend a nice lot of money," returned his lordship.

"Surely, Lord Moreton, you do not regret what you have done. You have acted like a most prudent husband, and though, of course, the death of Lady Moreton would leave you inconsolable, yet in that event the directors of the various insurance companies where you have effected policies on her life, amounting in all to £120,000, would hand that sum over to you, and bank notes will dry up the tears even of the most sorrowing widower," answered the doctor, significantly.

"You go such a roundabout way to work," retorted Lord Moreton, scornfully. "Upon my soul, I believe that I am much the bolder of the two. What is the good of talking about Lady Moreton's insurance policies. She is not dead, or likely to die."

"I differ from your lordship, I think that Lady

Moreton's life is in the most deadly peril," returned Stephani, slowly.

Lord Moreton turned pale, and filling up a bumper of port, drained it off at a draught. "What do you mean?" said he, in a high quavering voice.

"Hush, my lord, such matters are best discussed quietly. Have you never read of the beautiful girl who had been fed on the deadliest poisons, given to her at first in infinitesimal doses, and who, when she was married to the king's son, slew him with her first kiss."

"Here, none of these tricks, Stephani. I daresay you are a duced clever fellow, but I am not going to dine off deadly poison to kiss anyone to death, try it yourself if you want to," said Lord Moreton, in great alarm.

"Your intellectual powers are too brilliant, my lord, and outstrip my dull plodding brain. I never wished to suggest anything of the kind, but surely you know how sweet a kiss is, and I was suggesting that death might be conveyed by other sweets than a kiss."

"What do you mean?"

"It is the season for such fruit as you have in this wintry climate. Lady Moreton is fond of fruit, and will eat it though I have always warned you that it was most unwholesome for her."

"That you have, I will swear," returned Lord Moreton, "but all that seems to me a most clumsy mode of acting. These things leave ugly traces."

"Death from natural causes leaves no trace," said the doctor.

"Well, if you can bring that about you must be a

god—or a devil," remarked his lordship, adding the last clause as an afterthought.

The doctor's lip curled with a cynical smile. "Would you like to see a proof of what I assert?" asked he.

"I'll always believe my eyes sooner than a man's word," returned Lord Moreton, insolently, "so fire away, Stephani."

The Italian took no heed of his discourtesy, but taking up a light, rose from his seat, and entered the room which led out of the study, and was called the laboratory. In a few moments he returned carrying one large and two smaller cages. The largest one contained some dozen live rats, and the two smaller ones were empty. The doctor placed them all three on the table, and the caged vermin ran round and round their prison, poking their noses through the wires, and peering on the two men with their black, bead-like eyes.

"What do you bring those nasty beasts here for?" asked Lord Moreton, with a shudder. "I hate rats."

"All created things have their uses, even men and women," returned the doctor, coolly, as he bared his arm, and, opening the door of the cage, selected two of the imprisoned animals, and placed one in each of the smaller ones.

Lord Moreton gazed on the exploit with the greatest astonishment. "Well," exclaimed he, with an oath of astonishment, "I would not have done such a thing for five hundred pounds. Why, I should have been bitten to pieces."

"Use is second nature," answered the doctor, coolly, "I have been accustomed to handle noxious vermin.

Why, some years ago, I remember that I used to shake hands with my relations."

"That was when you bade farewell to them at the foot of the scaffold, I expect," said Lord Moreton, coarsely.

"You may be nearer the mark than you think, my lord," retorted Stephani, "and if some of my friends do not take care, I may bid farewell to them at the same spot. For myself, I have no fear."

"Well, go on with what you are going to show me," returned Lord Moreton, uneasily.

"See then," answered the doctor; and taking a silver dessert knife off the table, he passed his handkerchief along one side of the blade, then dividing a ripe peach that was in the porcelain basket with it, he placed one half in each of the rat's cages. After a moment's hesitation, the animals flew greedily upon the tempting morsel. "We have twenty minutes to wait, my lord, for the conclusion of the experiment. Shall we spend them in comparing those opposite passages in the works of Trismegistus and Albertus Magnus, regarding the transmutation of metals?"

"Stephani!" exclaimed Lord Moreton, starting to his feet, "I believe you are the devil."

"You pay me but a poor compliment, my lord. According to the legends of the Catholic church, or, to come nearer our own time, the tales of La Fontaine, the devil was often duped by the lowest intellects of the community."

"Hang alchemy for the moment," said his lordship; "but tell me the trick you are playing."

"I cut the peach with a knife, one side of which I had anointed with a little vegetable preparation of my own invention, which will be fatal to the life of that little animal in about twenty minutes. You or I, my lord, might survive it for thirty-six hours, a woman or a child for twenty-four. Death would then creep silently on, without spasms, contortions, or pain of any kind, and by that time, doubtless, the knife would have been cleaned, and as the fruit that had been cut with it, would be devoured, no traces of the little chemical operation would remain. Watch the rats, my lord, I am going to my own room to fetch myself some tobacco." As he spoke he left the room, and Lord Moreton remained in a fit of profound reflection. When he raised his head he was still alone. One rat was climbing merrily up the wires, and the other lay at the bottom of the cage quite dead.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE WEST WING.

For a day or two, Lady Moreton was quite happy again, and with all the elasticity of childhood—for she was little more than a child—thought no more of communicating with her uncle Humphrey. All appeared so calm and peaceful about the old Court: the air was so fresh, the flowers so sweet, and the trees so green. After the gloomy streets and dark offices of the city, all seemed so fair and bright, that her fears and gloomy forebodings fled, and she felt that life, after all, was worth living for. Accompanied by Hester, she made many excursions, and even penetrated into the fells that lay beyond the park. Drinking to excess had at last had its effects upon Lord Moreton's enfeebled frame, and he was confined to his room, from which, with feverish impatience, he drove his wife whenever she attempted to come and be of any assistance to him. Over his couch hovered the dark figure of the Italian doctor, with a gloomy shadow of anxiety on his face, as if he feared that the anchor upon which he relied so much for the future was gradually slipping away from the spot where he fancied it had got so secure a ground. Finding all her efforts at nursing her husband

repulsed, Lady Moreton gave herself up entirely to long rambles with Hester over the adjoining country, and speedily made herself acquainted with every towering peak and flowery dell within ten miles round. Then there were the gardens to look after, the hot-house to inspect—for Lady Moreton was passionately fond of fruit of all kinds—the pigeons to feed, the poultry to attend to, and, in spite of her husband's illness, time did not hang heavy on her hands, so long as the fair weather lasted. But in a hilly country the heavily charged rain clouds are but too apt to sink down, and after depositing their liquid load, soar away once more and for ten days the rain had been almost incessant, confining Lady Moreton to the house, and depriving her of all her customary relaxations. "Hester," said she, eying the pouring rain, "what am I to do with myself? I have read every book in the house, and, I think, inspected every portion of it, from the cellar to the garret, except that old tumbledown portion that you call the west wing."

"Don't you go there, my lady," said Hester, eagerly. "It is a nasty, uncanny place, and no good will come to you from going into it."

"Hester," answered Lady Moreton, with a light laugh, "living as you have done all alone in this place for so many years, has given you all sorts of foolish fancies. As if, because a place has been shut up for a long time, you can take any harm, except the chills, from going into it? Come, come, let us have no more of this foolishness; go and get the keys, and let us explore this Castle of Otranto."

"Castle of Otranto, my lady!" replied Hester; "I never heard of any castle of that kind or name about here."

"You foolish old thing," returned Lady Moreton, giving her a kiss. "It is the name of a book that has been published lately, giving an account of an old castle full of all sorts of strange rooms and hiding-places, in which the most wonderful things occur, very different from an old humdrum shut-up part of a house like this."

If Hester had wished, she, too, could have told her mistress of strange occurrences that had taken place at Moreton lodge, but, as she had all along done her utmost not to alarm her young mistress, she abstained, and, after a few more feeble remonstrances, went away in quest of the keys to open the dreary and desolate chambers in the west wing.

"Why, Hester," cried Lady Moreton, as the old housekeeper returned. "What have you got with you?"

"A tinder-box, my lady, a lantern with a spare candle, for so many of the shutters are closed that we should be in danger of finding ourselves in utter darkness," returned the housekeeper.

"Well, you foolish old thing, are you afraid of the dark? Why that great closet of yours off the store-room where you keep all your nice things is as dark as pitch, and yet you are not afraid to venture into it," returned Lady Moreton, with a laugh.

"Never mind, my lady," answered Hester, "just you let me go my own way to work. Who knows but you may be glad of my candle and lantern before you have

finished your visit? Shall I ask Will Fenton or any of the men to go with us?"

"Do not think of such a thing," exclaimed my lady, hastily. "Our excursion would be sure to get to that horrible doctor's ears, and we should see his dark face and fierce black eyes confronting us from some corner of the deserted rooms. Come along quickly, Hester, or we may be disturbed after all," and like a child who fears to be interrupted in some forbidden game of play, Lady Moreton took a few hurried steps to the door.

The two women crossed the courtyard, casting stealthy glances behind them. After some little difficulty, the ponderous lock yielded, and in another instant the west wing had swallowed them up. The place was in a more ruinous condition than ever; the rain had penetrated through the roof in several places, and formed dark greasy stains from ceiling to floor, as though some monstrous reptile had been crawling on the walls. The whole atmosphere had that damp and close odour which is always to be perceived in places that have been long shut up. In every corner, and hanging in dusty festoons from the beams, were gigantic spider's webs, some inhabited, whilst in the others a confused mass of legs and claws, was all the traces that remained of the former occupants. The floor was thickly covered with a black moist dust, such as is met with in underground vaults. On every side the same scene of desolation was displayed, rotting paper hanging in strips from the walls, shattered woodwork, broken window panes; whilst here and there were a few pictures, the paint of which was rapidly disappearing

from the canvas under the combined influence of time and damp ; in almost every room were some articles of furniture, all in a more or less dilapidated condition ; chairs without backs, tables without legs, here a shattered *fauteuil*, and there a broken *bureau*. Curtains which fell to pieces at a touch, hung even now from some of the windows, whilst tattered carpets, the rents of which formed traps for the feet of the unweary, partially covered the floors of some of the rooms. And beyond all this scene of ruin and desolation, there was an air of some veiled horror, of some great unspeakable mystery that hung over everything, and seemed to blast room and corridor, beam and rafter, with a deadly, though unspoken, curse.

Lady Moreton and Hester wandered in silence through the deserted wing. The old housekeeper cast occasional glances of ill-concealed terror around her, whilst the pallor upon Lady Moreton's cheek showed that she already repented of her rashness in having venturned into so dreary a spot.

"Have we not nearly got to the end of this miserable place, Hester ?" asked she, after a long silence.

Hester moved towards the window of the room they were in. "If your ladyship will look, we are yet some distance from the main portion of the house."

"So we are, I declare," returned Lady Moreton. "Well, it seems that we are to meet with no adventure to-day. By the way, where did you say you took those pretty mirrors from that you put up in my room ?"

"They were in the next chamber, my lady, and now I remember it, there was rather a handsome cabinet,

which could easily be done up, and made to look quite smart," answered Hester.

"Oh! let me see that," said Lady Moreton, eagerly, and hurried into the next room. "Really," exclaimed she, "the cabinet is lovely. Why did you never tell me of this before? We must send some men in to bring it away at once. It will do to keep all my laces and ribbons in."

As she spoke, she threw open a small door in it, but recoiled with a shriek of dismay as a she rat, accompanied by a litter of young ones, leaped out. Stepping back over the uneven flooring, she would certainly have fallen had she not caught at a decaying piece of tapestry which still hung to the wall. As she did so, she unconciously pressed a piece of iron that projected from the panel, and with a harsh grating sound, a portion of the woodwork slid aside, disclosing the entrance to a dark narrow passage, which had evidently been made in the thickness of the wall.

"A secret passage," exclaimed Lady Moreton, "Hester have you ever heard of this before?"

"Yes, my lady, I have heard that there are all sorts of queer hidden ways of getting about the house, and that there was a book with a lock to it in the old earl's study, telling all about them; but one night, my lady, when, saving your presence, he was rather merry, he took a knife, and cut the book all to pieces, and then burnt it, saying he would have no hole and corner work in any house of his."

"We must see where this goes to," said Lady Moreton, with great decision. "Come along, Hester," she

added, turning to the old housekeeper, who seemed half disinclined to enter the gloomy aperture, "no hanging back, but come with me." As the two women entered the passage, Hester's dress caught the corner of the door, and drew it to with a harsh metallic clang, and in an instant, they were in total darkness.

In spite of all her courage, Lady Moreton uttered a stifled cry, but Hester, with a little chipping at the flint succeeded in lighting the lantern, and after some search they contrived to find the spring which opened and closed the door.

"Thank heavens," said Lady Moreton, "now I feel that I can draw my breath once more; for the moment I thought that we were buried alive. Come along, Hester, and let us see where this secret way leads to."

It was a narrow torturous passage, sometimes so low that they had to stoop their heads, and at others so lofty that the rays of the lantern could not show them the ceiling. The air in it was close and musty, and occasionally as their hands touched the walls, they came in contact with loathsome creeping things, the very touch of which made them shudder. Once a bat flew against Hester's face, and made her drop the lantern with a faint shriek, fortunately, however, without extinguishing the light. As they progressed further in, the faint musty atmosphere disappeared, and the air grew fresher and purer; they were evidently approaching some aperture which had been formed for the purpose of ventilation. A little further on the light of the lantern disclosed a small arched opening on the right hand side which led into a very diminutive cell, which had

evidently been used for the purpose of concealment. The breeze they had felt penetrated through a narrow slit in the outer wall, which was no doubt concealed on the outside, by some of the exterior carvings which embellished the outer walls of the next wing. There were even a few worm-eaten articles of furniture still remaining in the cell, a pallet bed, a stool, and a little three-cornered table.

"I have heard of these curious hiding-places," said Lady Moreton, taking the lantern from the housekeeper's hand, and making a careful survey of this strange place. "These secret chambers were used to conceal the priests in during the time of the religious persecutions. Thank heavens all such things are over now."

The women left the secret chamber, and followed the passage, which became narrower and more winding than ever, the path was now more difficult, as in many places stones had fallen from the walls, and almost blocked up the passage, but at length they came to what threatened to bar all further advance, for an iron wall appeared to close their path. Carefully they examined it by the aid of the lantern, and about half way down they discovered after much search, a narrow slit in the iron, something like a strangely formed key-hole.

"This would require a key as thin as a knife-blade to open," remarked Hester, looking at it curiously.

"And here it is," said Lady Moreton, who had been looking about her, and as she spoke she stooped, and picked up a slender piece of iron which was lying at her feet. It fitted the crevice perfectly, and after work-

ing it in various ways, the right direction was at last hit upon, and with a harsh creaking sound the barrier slid away.

"Here, Hester," cried Lady Moreton, who was peering forwards, "see where you have brought me to, do you recognise this room, and those mirrors in porcelain frames?"

The housekeeper looked over her shoulder and to her amazement saw that the secret passage from the west wing opened into the side of the great tiled fire-place in Lady Moreton's chamber.

CHAPTER XI.

PEACHES AND PIGS.

SOME few days after the strange discovery of the secret passage, and the hidden cell, whilst Lady Moreton and Hester Kershaw were overhauling the contents of a huge basket of household linen which the housekeeper had exhumed from the recesses of one of her cupboards, a gentle tap came to the door.

"Come in," cried Hester crossly, for she hated to be disturbed at her work, "that is," she added apologetically, "if your ladyship will permit it."

"Of course, Hester," returned Lady Moreton, with a smile, "Am I not intruding in your especial domain? You are the mistress here, and not I."

The door opened, and the slender form of Hannah, Hester's little maid appeared on the threshold; in her hand was a tray upon which were several peaches in a white porcelain dish.

"Oh! what lovely peaches," exclaimed Lady Moreton, dancing up to her, and taking up one to examine it more closely.

"Where did you get that fruit from, child?" asked Hester, "You know I have always forbidden you to go into the garden and pick anything, old Adam Strugnell

the gardener, will be in a fine taking if he discovers that you have been meddling with the fruit.

"Please, dame," said the little maid, Master Adam brought them to me himself, and told me that they were the finest peaches of the season, and bade me take them to her ladyship."

"And you did quite right, little one," broke in her ladyship. "Adam is a dear old man, and knows how fond of fruit I am. How can you speak so harshly to the child, Hester, she has done no harm?"

"Perhaps not, my lady," replied Hester, dubiously, "but I never knew old Adam so free with his fruit before. You know what a trouble we have to get him to pick any at all; he says it spoils the look of his trees."

"Yes, but I suppose he has got over his grumpiness, and is going to turn over a new leaf," answered my lady, merrily. "How did he look, Hannah, when he brought the fruit?"

"Main cross, my lady," returned the girl with a curtsey. "He just banged it down on the table, and said 'Some fruit for my lady,' and then stumped off looking as glum as could be. I was going to bring it in just as he left it, but the foreign gentleman that looks after my lord, came through the kitchen, and asked me quite pleasantly, where I got such beautiful fruit from; and when I told him that Master Adam had brought it for my lady, and that I was going to take it into her, he joked with me finely, and said that I should never make a waiting-maid unless I did things in a more stylish way. Then he bid me get a silver knife, and a white plate, and when I did so, he arranged the peaches

on it, taking oh—such pains, even to wiping the blade of the knife on a bit of rag that he picked up somewhere, to make it look all bright and nice before I took it in."

"He doesn't seem to have made it look very nice," returned Hester, looking at the knife critically, "why one side of it is all smeary like."

"That horrid doctor?" said Lady Moreton, with a little stamp of the foot. "What makes him so polite all of a sudden? I don't seem to fancy anything that he has touched with those long thin fingers of his. There, child, put the fruit on the table. Don't cry, I am not angry with you," she added, as a tear rose to Hannah's eye. "Here, take this peach, and be off with you."

Hannah dropped a curtsey, and taking the fruit, left the room.

"Am I not a wretch to be sharp on the poor child?" said Lady Moreton, as soon as they were again alone, "but the very mention of that horrid man makes all my nerves jump."

"You weren't sharp on her a bit, my lady, the little hussy ought never to have brought them in here without first asking my permission; however, my lady, take my advice, and don't you touch one of them."

"But if I do not do so, it will give fresh cause for suspicion," answered Lady Moreton.

"Not a bit, my lady, for I will just cut them up, and then I will throw them to the pigs."

Without another word Hester acted on what she had proposed to do, and in a quarter of an hour returned triumphantly to her mistress.

CHAPTER XII.

AN APPEAL FOR AID.

ONE morning as I was sitting in my own room doing a bit of needlework, Gaffer Hodkiss, the hinde, came in, and asked me if he could see my lord.

"What do you come to me for?" said I a bit sharply, "You know everyone that wants my lord has to ask the foreign doctor."

"Yes, I know that, dame," answered he, "but you see the Eyetalian is out o' the way, and I wants my lord to sign a mittimouse, as quick as may be."

"A what!" asked I.

"A mittimouse, dame, one o' those things a justice signs when he wants a chap ta'en up; and I wants one to take all that gang of the Lees, and Coopers, 'od rabbit 'em."

"The gipsies," said I, "why they don't do any harm, at least they never have done, and they have always had permission to camp at the other end of the park. Even Will Fenton says they never meddle with the game."

"They don't do no harm, don't they, dame?"

"Not as I have ever heard of," replied I.

"Happen you haven't been down the farmyard way this morning?" asked Hodkiss.

"Bless the man, what should I do down there?" replied I.

"Well," returned he, "I heard as you were there yesterday, and that you was main struck with the pigs, which shows your taste, for they be a fine breed of porkers. Well, you won't see 'em no more."

"No more? has anyone stolen them? have they gone away?"

"If they'd agone away in proper fashion to make good pork, I wouldn't have minded, but to go off like they have, and to be no use to anyone, except they gipsy thieves, is eno' to make a man burn his Bible," returned the hinde.

"Dead, the pigs dead!" repeated I, aghast.

"Ay, them five black Berkshire ones, as was in a sty by themselves, and not a blessed one alive this morning."

A sort of cold shiver ran through my blood, I knew that common report said that the gipsies were in the habit of poisoning both pigs and fowls, and afterwards feasting on their bodies, when they were flung away as unfit for Christian food, but I also remembered that two days' before, my lady and I had passed the gipsy camp, and found the men packing the carts for a move; and I also remembered that I had given some peaches to those very pigs to flout the doctor. I felt that I must find out more about those peaches before I had done, so I told the hinde that it was no use his getting a warrant for the apprehension of the gipsies, for they had left the place two days' before; and throwing my apron over my head to keep the sun off, I went into the garden to have a talk with Adam Strugnell. I found the old man

grumbling at his work as usual, and abusing the lad who was helping him, according to his custom.

"Well, Adam," said I, coming up to him, and speaking loud, for he was hard of hearing. "Those were very nice peaches that you sent in for my lady yesterday."

"I should think they was," answered he, "I shan't get another such a lot this season; a sin and a shame I call it to pick such fine fruit, they ought to ha' gone to the show, and brought me in a guinea prize."

"They certainly were wonderful peaches, Adam," said I, "if it were only for the way in which they killed off my lord's pigs."

"What rubbish are you talking of, dame," returned he, crossly, "what have my peaches got to do with my lord's pigs?"

I told him that my lady had made me give them to the pigs, and that they were all dead this morning. When Adam Strugnell heard this, I thought that he would have fallen into a fit.

"What? given my peaches to the pigs?" cried he, "Why my lady must have gone clean off her head, I never heard of such a thing in my life, I won't stay here any longer. Forty years man and boy ha' I been here, and you don't catch me growing no more peaches to feed pigs on!"

"But if you thought it such a pity to send them in for my lady, why did you do so?" asked I, as soon as I could edge in a word.

"Do ye think I'd ha' sent 'em," answered the old man, contemptuously. "It was that black-faced papist of a doctor, who picked out the finest half-dozen peaches,

and told me to take 'em into the kitchen for my lady's use."

And so the doctor was after all the man who had sent in the peaches, and the villain must have poisoned them, but little Hannah had eaten one, and was none the worse, whereas the poor pigs had all died. It was a mystery too deep for my simple brain to solve; but that there had been foul play I was certain. What was the best course for me to pursue? Should I tell my lady of it, or leave her in ignorance of this cruel plot against her life? If I told the poor young thing, I feared that she would go mad from very terror, and I felt sure that if I kept it all to myself, I should be able to watch over her, and save her from any further perils by poison. I had always prepared her meals with my own hands, and I determined to take extra precautions, and as for the little sip of claret that she occasionally took, that I would get from the cellar myself. And so my lady heard nothing about the tragedy in the farmyard.

My lord still kept his room, though from the quantity of food and the large allowance of wine that was sent up to him, I do not think that he could be very bad. In spite of my keeping all my suspicions to myself, my lady seemed to have some lingering doubts as to the security of her position, and one night, as we were sitting talking in her room, she told me that she had written a letter to her uncle, Humphrey Craddock.

"I have told him frankly how matters stand here," said she, "of my lord's continued neglect and ill-treatment; of the feeling that I have of some plot being

afoot against me, and, above all, of the evil influence that this Doctor Stephani exercises over my husband Poor uncle Humphrey! I hope that my letter will not make him sad; he has had much to endure. Do you know, Hester, that he lost his wife within a year after they were married, and was left with a baby boy, who died shortly? Heaven knows how gladly I would leave this grand house, and go and share my uncle's dwelling, however humble it may be. I have asked him to send his answer under cover to you, Hester, and oh! I do so hope that he will write to me."

I was very pleased to hear what my lady had done, and that very day, instead of going to see Will Fenton's wife, we sent her up a basket of good things by little Hannah, whilst my lady and I went down to the village, and when the London coach stopped, gave the letter into the hands of the guard.

Just as my lady did so, Doctor Stephani made his appearance, and saw the man placing it in the mail bags, and if ever a man looked like a devil for a moment, he did. I think that he would have given ten years of his life to have known what that letter contained, and whom it was to; but that, fortunately, was impossible, and, affecting not to see us, he walked off hurriedly in the direction of the Court.

That day my lady and I, after leaving the village, walked along the banks of the river which ran through the park. In some places its banks were precipitous, and the stream was deep and ran very swiftly, whilst at others it widened into a broad, shallow expanse, with little islands thickly covered with trees and brushwood,

which ran down to the water's edge. In one spot which was a very favourite one with my lady, the stream was spanned by a little wooden bridge, with a single handrail on one side for the protection of those who crossed. Beneath it the water was very deep, and for about two hundred yards the current ran very swiftly, but at that distance was one of those shallows I have spoken of with a large island almost in the centre of it. At each side of this shallow were extensive woods, where in the old lord's time there used to be famous pheasant-shooting, but now the game was a good deal neglected.

This bridge was a favourite resort of my lady, and she would often stand resting her arms on the rail, and amuse herself by watching the chips and pieces of wood, which she had thrown into the stream, float down the current. The scenery was very lovely about there, and as there was plenty of shade on either side, it was a pleasant place in which to spend a summer's afternoon.

More than once we had seen Doctor Stephani either higher up or lower down the stream, pretending to fish. I say pretending, because I do not think that I ever saw a creature handle a rod or line more clumsily, and I am certain that he had been told by my lord, or, for the matter of that, had taken upon himself to watch what we did, and where we went. But this day we saw nothing of him, and my lady, taking up her accustomed position with her arms resting on the rail, gazed pensively upon the sparkling water as it dashed along eneath her.

"Ah, Hester," said she, "you cannot imagine what a strange fascination the river has for me; it is beautiful, and yet terrible, lovely to the eye, and yet, if it had me in its embrace, it would carry me down, stop my cries for help, and stifle me in its cold clutches; and yet, after all, would it not be better to end so, than to lead the life of misery and apprehension that I do?"

I saw that her nerves were strung up to the highest pitch, and with some difficulty I persuaded her to come home. I made her eat a little dinner, and then put her to bed, after giving her a good cup of mulled wine, and sat by her side until she fell asleep. Then I left her, as I had a few orders to give, but promised myself that I would return to her shortly, and not leave her again that night.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LEAF FROM THE CHRONICLES OF THE KINGS OF SPAIN.

And now I must confess, with a certain feeling of shame, that I used to get into the habit of creeping about, and listening at the door where my lord and the doctor used to hold their long talks, to see if I could pick up any information about their plots, for I felt sure there was a wicked one against my poor pet lamb. I had never done such a thing before, and I should have scorned any servants who would have endeavoured to find out the secrets of their betters, but I had read in a book once that the end justifies the means, and so, after I had left my lady, I would go creeping about the house in the dark, like some restless ghost, and trying by every means in my power to pick up some morsels of information. At first it was nasty nervous work, feeling my way about all those dark passages and staircases without a light, and I used to be afraid of meeting something uncanny on a different errand to my own, but after a while I got used to it, though I was always glad when I saw the gleam of light under my lord's chamber door, and knew then that I had arrived at my destination.

Once I was very nearly caught by the wicked doctor, who came upon me so suddenly in the dark that I dropped the unlighted candle which I always carried, with a faint scream.

"*Cospetto*, Mistress Kershaw," said he, in his sharp, suspicious way, "what are you doing here?"

"Going my rounds, sir, as usual, to see that all is safe," answered I, in so bold and brazen a manner that I almost wondered at myself.

"And do you always make your rounds, as you call them, in the dark?" continued he.

"My candle was blown out, but I am not a stranger in the old house, like some people, and can find my way about without a light," answered I, dropping a curtsey.

He looked at me steadily for a moment with those dark, wicked eyes of his, and then, giving a low whistle, and muttering some gibberish which sounded like "*Ben' trovato*," though I don't know what Ben he could have meant, turned on his heel and went away. I could see that he suspected me, but I hoped that I could be as cunning as he was, though it was a dreadful thing to be so sly, and was what I could never have done, had it not been for my dear mistress's sake.

However, some nights afterwards, when I was at my lord's door, I fancied that the doctor was coming out, and so crept quietly into the next room, and closed the door softly behind me. I was much surprised, though the room was quite dark, to see a bright streak of light on the opposite wall, and moving noiselessly up to see what it was, found a little crack in the wainscoting that separated the room from my lord's chamber. I

could not see much through the crevice, but I could hear every word, and I blessed my lucky stars that had enabled me to find so useful a spy hole. Drawing my gown tight around me so that it should not rustle, I put my ear to the crevice, and heard my lord's voice quite plain and distinct. He was talking in his usual nasty jeering way, and abusing the doctor for some mistake that he had made.

"Well, most sapient of medicos," said he. "I must congratulate you on your grand success. Pray how is the great work to go on if you not only do not find the means of replenishing our coffers, but add to our expenses by destroying my property?"

"I am at a loss to understand to what your lordship is referring," answered the doctor, in his calm, clear voice.

"Referring to!" squeaked my lord, banging his fist upon the table. "To what should I refer, pray, except to your slaughter of the innocents, 'what,' as Shakespeare says; but then you foreigners never can comprehend our great bard. 'What! all my pretty chickens, and their dam,' or, as I ought to say, 'all the little piglings, and the sow.' For their death was all the result you achieved with your wonderful paste, your silver fruit knives, and your cage of rats."

"And what result did your lordship think that I should achieve?" returned the doctor.

"Now, Stephani," screamed his lordship, in great irritation, "remember once for all that I will not be questioned, and that I know nothing about your doings, you murderous dog. Do you think that I am going to

put my neck in a noose, even though it be a silken one, like poor Ferrers, to please you? Not a bit of it; and remember that I am a justice of the peace and *custos rotulorum*, and I'm" (here his lordship swore a wicked oath) "if I don't commit you, if I find you at any of your knavish tricks. I took you out of that beggarly hole where you were starving, and have given you a position in an English nobleman's household, and is not that enough for you?"

"I am quite aware of your lordship's kindness to such a poor insignificant creature as I am, and that I ought to feel proud to be hanged, if by so doing I should further your lordship's interests."

"There," said his lordship uneasily, "don't talk about hanging; it always gives me a queer sensation about the throat. Pass the bottle."

"Not yet, Lord Moreton," answered the doctor, coolly. "I want you to have all your senses about you, and though it makes you feel uncomfortable, we *must* talk about hanging, for to tell your lordship the truth, it is the one risk that we shall have to take."

"Don't say 'we,' you infernal scoundrel," said my lord, in a loud, quavering voice. "I have nothing to do with your plots."

"I am afraid, my lord, that if there was any mistake —mind, I do not for a moment say that there is likely to be one—those twelve highly educated and most respectable citizens who form a jury would bring in a verdict of guilty against you as well as against me."

"Why, what proof is there against me?" blustered his lordship.

"The benefit that would accrue to you by her ladyship's death. Look you here, my lord, I have, and am still willing to serve you devotedly, but don't let me hear you talk again about leaving me in the lurch. Let us throw our cards on the table, for it is no use masking our play. We are very near the great secret, and must have money to carry on the experiments. Lady Moreton's life is insured for a heavy sum, and that we can only get by her death. It is a painful necessity, and one that I deeply regret, but we have no alternative, unless, indeed, your lordship cannot bear the thoughts of becoming a widower."

"I hate the cat," remarked his lordship, spitefully. "She pushed me down, and hurt me, when we were children together."

"In that case I may presume that your lordship will offer no obstruction to any little plan that I may devise?" resumed the doctor.

"No, no, do what you like; and look here, Stephani, don't you threaten me. You know I'm deuced ill and weak, and all that sort of thing, and you are a good fellow, and ought to make allowances for me, so pass the bottle, and let us have done with the matter for to-night."

'There is something that I should wish to read to your lordship before you retire to rest," replied the doctor, in his most polite manner. "You will no doubt find out the application of it yourself."

I could hear the grating of the decanter as he pushed it across the table, and the heavy sound of his feet as he strode to the bookcase on the other side of the room.

Here was a plot. Oh! the cold-blooded villains, were they really going to murder my poor dear mistress? It did not seem that there was any doubt in the matter, and yet what could I do to help her? If I were to denounce them they would both deny it, and who would believe a poor servant like me against a great nobleman like my lord, or a cunning rogue like the Italian doctor. As I was pondering what was best to be done, I heard the doctor return to his seat at the table, and once again begin to speak.

"Listen, my lord, this is a volume of the private history of the Kings of Spain, by Don Guzman di Sotomayor. Shall I translate a small portion of it to you?"

"What devil's plan have you got in your head, Stephani?" asked his lordship peevishly. "However if you must read, do it in plain honest English; you know I hate your foreign gibberish."

In a solemn tone the doctor commenced.

"Now the king was still bitterly jealous of the great duke, and though he had stripped him of all his possessions, and had confined him in the castle of the mountains, yet he dreaded his influence greatly, for many of the nobles of the Court sympathised with him, and thought that he had been harshly dealt with. And as the king was sitting one day in his private room, meditating on these things, an usher of the Court announced the arrival of the Cardinal. And when the king heard of it he was right glad, for he had all faith in his Eminence, and as soon as he came he told him his troubles. And the Cardinal meditated for a while, and then he said:

"'Has your Highness a trusty man at the Castle of the Mountains.'

"'I have,' replied the king. 'The governor is mine, heart and soul.'

"The Cardinal thought for a little longer, and said:

"'Lend me the royal signet, your majesty, for a few days, and I, or rather Providence, will rid you of your enemy.'

"And the King gave it to him, and the Cardinal then left the Court.

"Now the warder whose duty it was to wait upon the great duke, one day told him that some nobles at the Court had bribed him to convey to the prisoner a file, and a rope, and that he could cut the bars of his window with the one, and lower himself to the rocks beneath the castle, where fleet horses would be in waiting for him.

"And the duke did so, but the strands of the cord had been cut in various places, so that when the duke was half-way down it broke, and he perished miserably on the jagged rocks. So was the king delivered of his enemy, and the Cardinal came to great honour, but the governor of the Castle of the Mountains was banished for life to the Balearic Islands for having connived at the escape of a prisoner."

"Does your lordship perceive the application of this?" asked the doctor, when he had finished reading.

"No, I do not; and what's more, I don't want to," answered my lord; and from his voice I judged that he had been drinking freely.

Neither did I, but I felt that there was some cruel treachery hidden beneath it.

CHAPTER XIV.

SETTING THE TRAP.

AND now, indeed, it seemed as if there was a chance of Lady Moreton's escaping from the terrible house of bondage in which her husband had so long detained her. The appeal for help had not passed unheeded. Clinton Hawley, whom Humphrey Craddock had adopted at the time his little son died, and whom he had once fondly hoped would have married his beloved sister's child, Gladys, had without an instant's delay, flown to Lady Moreton's assistance, and had contrived to convey to her the intelligence that a post-chaise would, on a certain night, with Humphrey Craddock inside, be waiting on the main road near a little door in the park wall, to carry Gladys and faithful old Hester to a place of safety. Chance, too, had placed Lady Moreton's deadliest enemy *hors de combat*, for Doctor Stephani, having met Clinton Hawley, who had penetrated into the demesne in the guise of a travelling artist, had ordered him away with such brutal violence that the young man, casting prudence to the winds, had administered such a castigation to the foreigner with a stout oaken walking-stick, that the doctor had

with difficulty managed to reach the Court, where he had been confined to his room ever since.

Three days had passed, and Lady Moreton and Hester had made every preparation for their flight from the Court. By Clinton Hawley's advice they were going to encumber themselves with but little luggage; and a small valise which would hold a few changes of linen had been secretly conveyed to him by Hester, which was to be put into the chaise that was to come from Deepborough. The doctor was still confined to his room, and Lord Moreton, who appeared to have conquered the prejudice which he had shown against visiting a sick-chamber, now passed the greater portion of his time by the patient's bedside, though, from the quantity of wine which he consumed, he could not have been of much use in attending to the invalid's wants.

Hester Kershaw was on thorns until the day should arrive upon which her own dear mistress should be removed from all the perils that surrounded her at Moreton Court, and felt a secret pleasure in knowing that the astute Italian was about to be outwitted. The night before my lord visited the doctor's room, and after remaining there for a short time, rang the bell, and, informing the servant that the patient was in a very feverish state, so much so indeed that he contemplated sitting up with him, dismissed him for the night. That night the lord and the doctor talked earnestly together, and the strong will of the Italian triumphed over the various delays and objections that his more vacillating fellow-conspirator proposed.

"I tell you, my lord," said the doctor, bringing his

hand down heavily upon the table, and hastily withdrawing it with an exclamation of pain, "that my work will be done to-night; that is to say, the trap shall be set. Whether the prey will walk into it I do not know, but until it is set we can hope for nothing. In another hour all will be quiet in the house, and I can steal out and in without being suspected."

"You are a terrible man, Stephani," said Lord Moreton, looking at him in fear and wonder, "and an able one too, though I do sometimes jeer at you. But are you sure that all is safe?"

"No one can blame you, my lord, for a mere accident. What will happen to her ladyship might just as well have occurred to anyone else."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," answered Lord Moreton, impatiently, "but suppose we are found out, what will happen then?"

"If we lose the game, the possibility of which I utterly deny," returned the doctor, "we must be prepared to hand over the stakes."

"The stakes!" repeated his lordship; "why, man alive, that means giving up our necks to the hangman."

"Yours, perhaps, my lord, but not mine," answered the Italian, producing a small silver box from his waistcoat pocket. "I think hanging a most barbarous method of execution, and I will never patronise it by submitting my neck to the man you call Jack Ketch. There are five little pellets in this box, each one of which will strike a man down like a thunderbolt. Two of them are quite at your service," and as he spoke he extended the box towards his patron.

But Lord Moreton shrunk back with a little shiver of alarm.

"Keep your poisons to yourself, you miserable quack," cried he. "I don't want any of them. They will think twice before they hang a lord; besides, you say that there is no fear of the secret leaking out."

"I have done nothing but tell you so, my lord, from the very first," replied the doctor. "Only be bold, and all will go well. You say that the insurance office will pay the money without any unnecessary delay."

"They will want to be certain that the person whose life has been insured is dead, and in this case they will wait for the coroner's verdict," answered Lord Moreton, growing rather pale.

"Just so; a few mere formalities," replied the doctor. "You see, my lord, in a month's time—say from to-morrow—we shall be in possession of ample funds, and the great work will proceed without further hindrance."

"Why do you say from to-morrow?" murmured Lord Moreton, uneasily.

"Well, the next day, or the day after, whenever the little bird thinks fit to step into the trap; but be sure that it will not be much later than that. I only wish we could get that old Jezebel, Kershaw, into it too; but we cannot have all we wish, and must be thankful for one mercy at a time," said the doctor, piously.

"Confound it all! don't talk about another when this one isn't done, muttered his lordship. "But I say, Stephani," he continued, "I don't think you believe in anything. Do you mean that you are not afraid of

going upon your present errand all through the dark, past the trees in the garden, the leaves of which always rustle so if there is the smallest bit of a breeze. Then you have to skirt the churchyard, where step-papa shot the old lord, my father. I tell you, man, for all the money that is coming to me I wouldn't do such a thing. I know that I should see something that would frighten me out of my wits. I suppose you'll say that you don't believe in ghosts. It is positively wicked of you; I hate irreligion, Stephani."

"Well, well, my lord, I will take the risk of the ghosts; but it seems strange that you should be afraid of such things when you do not hesitate at a—— "

"No, you sha'n't say such a word," said the little lord, jumping from his seat, and clapping his hand on the doctor's mouth. "I told you before that I would not have it; you sha'n't say such things before me; it is profane and wicked, and is a want of respect for my dignity and position."

"Well, my lord, I won't say anything more; but, at any rate, you will not be above profiting by the result of any accident that may happen."

"How can I help profiting by the hand of Providence? A man ought to take his precautions against sudden bereavements," replied Lord Moreton. "Have you got the tools? You foreigners are so hasty and impetuous that you are quite capable of going without them."

"I have them all here," answered Stephani, taking up a small canvass bag, from which a metallic clatter issued, "and now I am off."

"On my word, my good Stephani, I am half inclined to come with you. I don't like being left alone in this rambling old house," said Lord Moreton, whose teeth had begun to chatter with fright.

"Better not, my lord, better not," returned the doctor, swinging the bag over his shoulder, and wincing with pain as he did so. "You see if anything comes out you will now be perfectly clear, and I only should be hanged up by the neck."

"Yes, yes, there is something in that too," said the little lord; "but for all that I don't like to be left alone. How long do you think you will be, my good Stephani?"

"About three-quarters of an hour if I am not disturbed at my work; if so, of course, longer. But there, you sit here quietly. You have nearly a full bottle of port before you, and that ought to occupy you until my return. Keep up your spirits, my lord, and only think of it as one of the operations necessary for arriving at the great secret."

As he spoke the doctor left the room, and, gliding cautiously along the corridor, descended the stairs, and, opening a side door, peered out cautiously into the night.

There was no moon, and the darkness was intense. A light breeze made the boughs of the old trees rasp against each other with a harsh, creaking sound; far away in some distant kennel could be heard the long-drawn howl of a dog, whilst all the thousand-and-one strange sounds which are born of the night were heard at short intervals.

"A good dark devil's night for such work as mine," muttered the doctor, as he still paused on the doorstep. "Not much chance of meeting anyone, I think. Ah! if I could only meet that English bully at some quiet corner, when he did not expect me, I don't think my knife would miss him. *Maldetto!* I would give half of what I am going to make to hear the haft of my knife chink against his breastbone. But revenge will always keep, my Anglo; and so let me take the first step towards earning an honourable retirement amongst the almond groves of Damascus."

As he finished speaking he made a step forward, and vanished so suddenly that it seemed as if the black night had swallowed him up.

Meanwhile Lord Moreton fidgetted about the room in a pitiable state of nervousness and terror. He poured out and drank off two or three glasses of port, but the potent wine seemed to have lost its wonted effect. Strange sounds seemed to fill his ears, the grinding of tools, and, ever and anon, a woman's shriek.

"Curse the fellow; why did I ever let him lead me into this mess?" muttered he, once more having recourse to the decanter. "And yet the grand work; fancy how all will cringe and bow to me if I have the power of creating gold and diamonds; and then after that, comes, so that cursed doctor assures me, the Elixir of Life! To live for ever, to have no terror of the future, no fear of the cold, damp grave. And what stands in the way of all this happiness? Nothing but a frail life, the life of a miserable girl. It is a mere

nothing. I can't think why I hesitate for a moment. It will soon be over, and she will hardly suffer at all. Let me see though, I should like her to suffer ; I don't know why, but I think it seems to do me good to make things suffer. At any rate, when it is all over, I will turn out that old harridan, Hester Kershaw, to starve. See if I don't. I daren't get rid of her now, I don't know why. It is a feeling that I have ; but afterwards, oh, afterwards, she shall tramp. Hang the fellow, how long he is." continued Lord Moreton, going to the window, and looking out. "A black, dark night," continued he, "just suited for a deed like that scoundrel has gone on. I wouldn't be out in it alone with the crimes I am sure the fellow must have on his conscience, for a great deal ; and yet, I'll be bound, that he is going on his devil's work with as light a heart as if he were on his way to one of those fiddling, singing parties, which miserable foreigners take such a delight in. I must have more wine," and, sitting down before the table, he began to drink freely. Suddenly he started to his feet with a wild cry ; for he felt a hand laid lightly on his shoulder.

It was Doctor Stephani, who had entered the room noiselessly, and now stood behind his chair.

"Well — is it — is it done ?" stammered Lord Moreton.

"The trap is set, and we have only to wait for the bird to enter it," replied the doctor ; and, locking up his box of tools in a cupboard, he sank into a seat.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE TOILS.

At last the eventful day for Lady Moreton's escape had arrived. Hester, who was half mad with expectation, endeavoured to conceal her excitement, lest she should in any way affect the spirits of her mistress, and did all she could to impress upon her the necessity of remaining calm.

"That black-hearted doctor has never stirred out of his room yet, my lady," said she, "but for all that it behoves us to be very careful, and not to alter any of your usual habits; so, with your permission, I would suggest that you should go this afternoon, as you often have done, to visit poor Mistress Fenton, and come back here about seven o'clock. There is no need to be alarmed now, as the doctor is not likely to be skulking about the park. At any rate, I shall remain in the house, and if I hear that he has left his room I will come out and meet you, for the coward would not dare molest you if I were with you. Don't you think that that would be a good arrangement, my lady."

"You dear old thing," said Lady Moreton, "your proposals are always excellent. I am in such a flutter of nervous excitement that I do not think I could have stayed in these dreary rooms for the whole of the day.

This visit to the poor sick girl will serve to wile away the time, and we can talk and chatter together on my return home until the hour comes when we are to steal out, and cross the park on our way to new life and freedom. But listen to me, Hester, for there are moments when my heart misgives me sadly. Do you think that I am right in leaving my husband's house in this surreptitious manner?"

"Leaving your husband's house! my lady," repeated Hester in tones of great surprise, "can there be any question of the necessity of your doing so?"

"Certainly, and a very great question too," answered Lady Moreton. "I am very unhappy here, and my husband does not treat me kindly. But there are many wives in the same position who do not think it necessary to leave their husband's houses. You will say that I have a suspicion that there is some plot against my life; but after all it is *only* a suspicion. I have no proof that anything of the kind is on foot. It may be all the fault of my own imagination. Indeed, I think at one time Clinton Hawley believed it to be so."

"He thinks differently now," remarked Hester, sententiously.

"Why should he do so, Hester?" asked Lady Moreton. "He had no more proof than I have that there is any real plot against me; and yet, now you bring it to my mind, he did turn round all of a sudden, and argue for my taking refuge with Uncle Humphrey, as strongly as he could."

"And he had good reason for doing so," said Hester.

"Why, you dear old thing, you are quite oracular. and let the words drop from your lips as if they were so

many lumps of gold. Why had he good reason for what he did?"

"Don't you really know, my lady?" asked Hester Kershaw, staring at her with widely open eyes.

"Of course I don't; are your wits gone wool-gathering?"

"They have, indeed, my lady," exclaimed Hester, striking her forehead, as a sudden gleam of recollection shot through her brain. "All this going away, and getting clear of our troubles has, I think, driven me clean mad. Of course you don't know anything, you poor innocent lamb. Why, didn't I keep it all from you about the pigs, and the book about the Spanish king, and all that because I thought that it would fret your own sweet soul, and make you mope, and grow more melancholy than you were before."

Lady Moreton gazed on Hester with a look of surprise, not unmixed with alarm. "Pigs! books about Spanish kings!" echoed she. "What *do* you mean?"

"I kept it all back from you, my lady," said Hester, "and I hope you will forgive me for it. It was for the best, I am sure, and so Master Hawley thought when I told him; and that was what made him change his mind all of a sudden, and grow so keen to hurry you off to London, where you would be in safety with your uncle. But listen to me now, and I will tell you everything." And without further delay Hester poured out the story of the poisoned peach, and the death of the pigs.

"Then there really was a plot to poison me?" cried Lady Moreton, turning deadly pale.

"As certain as you stand there, my lady; and ever

since then you have never had bite or sup except what I cooked for you with my own hands, not to mention scouring out every pot and kettle before I used them."

"Dear Hester, no douht you saved my life," said Lady Moreton, going up to her, and pressing a kiss on the old woman's withered cheek.

"I did my best, my lady, and, thank Heaven, as yet I have been successful," replied Hester.

"But the book about the Spanish king, what of that?" pursued Lady Moreton.

Hester told her of the habit she had got into of prowling about the old house, and listening at doors, to see if she could gain any information, and of the conversation she had heard upon the night on which Doctor Stephani had read the extract from the book to Lord Moreton.

"This is very serious," observed Lady Moreton, when the old housekeeper had concluded her recital; "though I cannot tell what he meant, yet I feel sure that there is some sinister motive concealed beneath it. Did you tell Mr. Hawley all this?"

"Every word, my lady," returned Hester, "and he, too, thought that there was mischief brewing, and that was why he changed his mind so suddenly, and was so urgent for your ladyship to leave this. But let me say no more about such dreary matters. Are you going to see Will Fenton's wife this afternoon?"

"Yes, but you must walk down with me to the river; I feel quite safe when I have passed that, and you can return to the Court after seeing me so far, and keep a watch on that cruel Italian," said Lady Moreton.

"I will just bring up a bit of lunch for you, my lady, and by the time you have eaten it we can start; for the sooner you are out of these four walls until you leave them for good the better I shall like it," answered Hester, bustling out of the room as she spoke.

In about two hours' time Lady Moreton and Hester came out on to the terrace, and the first object that met their eyes was Doctor Stephani being propelled gently along it by one of the servants, in a wheeled chair, which had been formerly used by the old lord when he was suffering from an attack of gout.

As he saw Lady Moreton he raised his hat, and, signing to his attendant to stop, said, "I must apologise for being unable to rise and greet you, my lady, but my late accident must prove my excuse; and I crave your forgiveness for not doing so."

"If that is all you have to get forgiveness for," broke in Hester Kershaw, quickly, "you will, I am sure, have no difficulty in obtaining it from her ladyship."

"Hush, Hester," said Lady Moreton. "Doctor Stephani," continued she, "I am grieved to see anyone suffering as you appear to be doing; but as for my forgiveness, if you desire to earn it, try to induce my husband to lead a better life, and change his habits, and then you will not only have my forgiveness for anything you may have done against me, but also my future gratitude."

The doctor bent his head humbly.

"I have thought much since my confinement to my room, and no doubt my cogitation will soon bear fruit. A change may even take place in this house before your return. Shall you be long away?"

"I am only going across the river to the keeper's cottage," answered Lady Moreton.

"You are going a long way, my lady," returned the doctor, with a slight uplifting of his eye-brows.

"Not so very far. I have often been there before."

"When one starts on a journey, we never know how far we may go," remarked the doctor, sententiously. "Giles," he added, "give me your arm to help me indoors. My head will not bear the flare of the sun."

"The doctor seems very meek and humble to-day," remarked Lady Moreton, as she and Hester took the road to the river.

"He meant mischief, my lady—not meekness, or humbleness either!" retorted Hester. "I distrust every inch of him. What did he mean by talking about a change, and a long way to go?"

"I am sure I do not know," answered Lady Moreton, carelessly; "but I am relieved, though it sounds wicked to say so, that he is so ill, for now I feel quite safe. Do not you think that I am, Hester?"

"I fervently trust so," replied the old housekeeper. "But here we are at your favourite spot—the bridge. Do not, however, linger here to-day, but get on to the keeper's cottage at once, whilst I go back to the Court and keep an eye on our enemies' movements. If there are the slightest grounds for suspicion, I will come and meet you, my lady—yes, and bring a stout fellow with me too, who would knock a dozen Italian doctors on the head sooner than you should come to any harm."

"Very well. Then I will reserve my farewell to the river and bridge until my return. I shall be home by half past eight for certain."

"Do not be later, my lady," answered Hester. "I shall be uneasy until I see you again. Remember that to-day is the turning-point of your life."

Lady Moreton shook her head gaily at her attached servant, and then, crossing the bridge, ascended the slight incline which led from the river; and Hester, after watching her until she was out of sight, returned slowly to the Court, her mind filled with a sad foreboding of some coming ill, for which, however, she could not assign the slightest definite reason.

* * * *

It was nearly eight o'clock as Lady Moreton again descended the slope that led to the little bridge that crossed the river. She had been sitting and reading to the sick woman from the Book of Life, and had given her all the money that she had in her pocket, to provide her with comforts during the absence which she did not dare to speak about to her.

"O, my lady!" exclaimed the grateful woman, "why do you give me all this? Shall I not see you again in a day or two?"

Lady Moreton's heart smote her, but she evaded any direct reply, and shortly afterwards took her leave. Now that she was alone, and could think undisturbed, the knowledge of the approaching sudden change in her life filled her with a vague feeling of dread. Would all go right? Would she find rest and repose with her uncle Humphrey, who had no longer the powerful weapon of wealth to protect her with? What if she were forced back to her former state of captivity within those hated walls? And yet she felt that it would be the basest ingratitude to desert those who had come to

her aid on her first appeal for help. No, come what might, she would go through everything; and she devoutly prayed that all might be for the best. With these thoughts in her mind, she set her foot upon the planking of the bridge, and then, stopping for a moment, drank in with her eyes, for the last time perhaps, she thought, her favourite prospect. All was inexpressibly beautiful; the setting sun had reddened the whole horizon, and gilded the tops of the lofty trees and feathery rushes that fringed the banks of the river. Below her the stream flowed deep and rapid, swirling round the little piers that supported the bridge, in a thousand different eddies. Behind her, some two hundred yards off, the river banks receded, and the stream formed a huge shallow estuary not more than three feet deep anywhere, with a wooded island in the centre, and flanked on either side by extensive woods, now growing rapidly dark in the shades of evening. Far away she could hear the distant cawing of the rooks, and the faint lowing of the cattle, as these were being driven home from pasture; and as she gazed on the stream, a kingfisher, like a living mass of emerald and amethyst, darted from the reeds, and, flashing for a moment in the last gleam of sunset, disappeared in the fast-approaching gloom.

"How exquisite all this is!" sighed Lady Moreton; "and how happy could I have been here had circumstances permitted me!"

As these thoughts passed through her mind, she stepped forward to take up her favourite position, with her arms resting on the hand-rail.

Hardly had she done so, than there was a rending crash, the protecting rail parted in two places, and Lady Moreton was plunged headlong into the river.

The suddenness of her immersion checked the cry that rose to her lips. In an instant she came to the surface again, and, with the clutch of despair, grasped one of the supports of the bridge, at the same time uttering a piercing cry for help.

For a moment she maintained her position, but the current was too strong for her. Her little delicate fingers could no longer retain their hold, and, with another agonised cry, she was borne away under the bridge. Twice the waters foamed over her head. She felt that her senses were leaving her, and made a violent effort to reach the shore. But the cruel current held her tightly in its embrace, and, filling her mouth with water, remorselessly bore her away, for she had no longer strength to cope with it; and her insensible body was soon the sport of the capricious waters of the stream. A long time Hester waited for the return of her mistress, and at last, as the darkness of night closed in, she was unable to restrain herself longer, and, calling up some of the men with lanterns, she set out in search of the missing woman. The broken handrail of the bridge told its own sad tale, and, with a cry of despair, the poor old woman felt that some hideous plot, the secret of which she could not fathom, had been carried out successfully against her dear mistress. All night the river was dragged, but all was fruitless, and, in despair, Hester once more returned to the gloomy shadows of Moreton Court.

CHAPTER XVI.

HESTER KERSHAW'S GHOST STORY.

My first impulse was to fly away from this house of terror, never to return to it, but some faint glimmering of hope made me unwilling to quit Moreton Court.

As soon as it grew dark, I crept to my lady's room, for a kind of inward feeling seemed to draw me there, and to make me feel uncomfortable as long as I was away from it. I sat up thinking and reading my Bible until eleven o'clock, which was a late hour for me, and then I began to feel drowsy, I suppose from the terrible excitement that I had gone through; so, after kneeling down and saying my prayers, I threw myself upon my bed in the dressing-room, dressed as I was, for I felt quite unequal to the task of taking my things off. I left the door between the two rooms open, and as the candles were alight on my lady's toilet table, her room was quite bright, whilst mine was enveloped in darkness. I do not think that I remained awake very long, but my sleep was a troubled one; for, though I did not dream of my poor lost mistress, yet that wicked doctor seemed to be hunting me with a long knife in his hand, all through every kind of impossible and break-neck places, whilst I, though fleeing for

my life, could not get far ahead of him, but could hear him panting close behind me, and feel his hot breath on the back of my neck, as he strained every nerve and sinew to overtake me, and to strike me dead with his cruel knife.

All of a sudden I awoke with a great start, and as I did so, the clock in the stable turret began to strike. I counted every stroke—it was twelve o'clock, so I had only been asleep for an hour. I felt very nervous and uncomfortable, and sat up in bed looking anxiously, I know not why, into my lady's room. All was as still as death; even the creaking and groaning of the woodwork, which is heard so much during the silence of the night in all old houses, was hushed. The silence seemed to frighten me, and I longed for something to break it. I soon had my wish, for all at once I could hear a sound as if some one was moving with the greatest precaution along the corridor, into which the door of my lady's chamber opened. Who could it be moving about the house at that hour of the night? Was it the Italian doctor on some errand of murder, of which my dream had been sent to me as a warning? I was not afraid of him; close to the head of my bed hung a rope, which was connected with the alarm bell on the roof, and had any danger menaced me, I could in a moment have summoned all the household. But there was another sound now accompanying the footsteps, which caused my hair to bristle with terror. It was the swish, swish, of some wet garment trailing along the oaken boards of the corridor. Nearer and nearer it came, still there was the same stealthy tread,

and still the same sound of drapery sweeping along the passage. With every nerve quivering with fear I sat still; the steps halted at the door, the handle turned; whatever was outside was coming in. I think that for a moment or two, I was insensible from terror, and when my eyes opened again, I saw something which almost made me swoon once more. Right in the centre of the room, in the full light of the candles, stood my dear lady in the dress she had worn on that fatal afternoon when she had gone forth on her errand of mercy to the keeper's cottage over the river.

But the dress which had been so fresh and pretty when she went out, was now dank and draggled, stained with mud and river slime, and torn in several places. Her face was deadly pale, and her long fair hair hung in dishevelled masses over her shoulders. Her feet were bare, and looked cold and white as marble, whilst her hands were scratched in many places, and stained with blood. During my half swoon she must have moved into the centre of the room, and there she stood with a look in her eyes of some hunted animal that had escaped the hounds after a hard chase. I could feel the cold sweat pouring down my face, and yet I felt a sensation that was not wholly fear. Was it really my dear lady that I saw before me, and had she come back from the silent pools of the river to speak to the poor old Hester who loved her so well? Could it be death that I was gazing upon, and had the dead really the power to come back, and visit the living? As these thoughts moved rapidly through my brain, the figure glided

quickly across the floor to the fireplace, and with its poor torn fingers seemed to be searching for something in the iron-work. Whatever it was, the phantom could not find it, and throwing up its hands with a faint wailing cry, exclaimed "Oh! Hester, Hester, why are you not here to help me to escape from these cruel men who are thristing for my blood?"

"Ghosts don't talk like that," cried I, springing from my bed, and clasping the little shivering figure in my arms. "My lady, my dear lady," cried I, "and have you really come back to your poor old Hester?"

For a moment she struggled wildly to escape from my grasp, and then as she recognised me, leant her head upon my shoulder, and relieved her pent-up feeling by a burst of tears. For a few seconds we remained thus, and then she suddenly wrenched herself from my embrace, crying, "The door, the door, lock out the murderer," and running to it, shot the bolt into its socket.

All my fears of its being a ghost had now vanished, but I was still terribly alarmed at the state in which she was. As I held her in my arms, I could feel that she was all damp and wet, and that her little feet and hands were like ice. Calling her by every endearing name that I could think of, I drew her into the dressing-room, and hastily taking off her wet clothes, wrapped her in the blankets of the bed from which I had just risen. There was, fortunately, a little brandy in the room, which I had brought up one night when I was suffering from faceache, and after I had made her swallow a little, I chafed her hands and

feet, until I had got some warmth into them. All the time she was moaning in a low voice, and sobbing under her breath, like a child that fears to be scolded if it makes too much noise. After a time she got more calm, and lay for a few minutes with her head resting on my arm, whilst I scothed her by every means that I could think of, and entreated her to tell me what I could do for her.

At last, after a few moments silence, she said in her pretty child-like accents, "Oh! Hester dear, I am so hungry."

"Hungry, my lady," echoed I.

"Yes," returned she, "I am almost starving."

By great good luck my little maid Hannah had brought my supper upstairs for me, and there it was on a tray, covered with a fair white napkin, as nice a little snack as any one could wish; two slices of real York ham, a piece of gooseberry pie, and some home-made bread. I placed it before my lady in a moment, and at first she ate quite greedily, but after a few mouthfuls she became faint again, and it was not until I had forced a little more brandy on her that she was able to make anything like a meal.

"You dear old Hester," said she, almost in her old manner. "I do not know whether I am safe here, but I feel I must sleep; will you watch over me, and see that I come to no harm? Afterwards we can talk, but now——," and as she spoke her head fell back on the pillow, and without another word my beauty was asleep, nor did she stir again until the stable clock chimed six.

CHAPTER XVII.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

As the clock struck, Lady Moreton opened her eyes, and gazed around her in extreme astonishment, then as the real nature of her position flashed across her mind she gave a faint cry of anguish, and covering her face with her hands, wept bitterly. "Don't do that, my pretty," cried Helen Kershaw, "You wring my heart. Cheer up. All will yet be well."

"How can it be well?" sobbed Lady Moreton. "I am back again in this dreadful house, and as soon as my husband and the doctor find that I am still alive, they will devise some fresh scheme by which to put me out of the way. Where is Clinton? Hester. Cannot he do something to save me?

"Master Clinton," replied Hester, "has gone up to London with your uncle Humphrey. When they heard that you had disappeared, for I took good care that they should hear of it, they started at once, and they are coming back with the Bow Street runners to find out what has become of you."

"But they may not be back for days, and no one can say what may be done to me in that time," returned Lady Moreton.

"Now that I have seen you again they will not dare say that you are dead, for I could come forward and contradict the villains," exclaimed Hester, fiercely.

"You do not know with what a man you have to deal," answered Lady Moreton, sadly. "The doctor would think nothing of putting you out of the way, to stop your tongue, and then I should be entirely at their mercy."

"Can we not steal away before any one is up, and get to some distant village, where we might hide until you had had time to write to your uncle Humphrey?" asked Hester.

"My poor Hester," replied Lady Moreton, "if every one thinks that I am dead I should not be able to get a hundred yards away from the house without being taken for my own ghost, just as you did, you foolish old thing; and then there would be a nice panic, and disturbance, which could not fail to get very shortly to the ears of Lord Moreton and the doctor."

"But," said Hester, "if your ladyship remains here, one of the servants will be sure to come across you, and then where will you be?"

"No servant will come across me in the place where I am going to hide myself, Hester?"

"Why, my lady, what do you mean, what place is there in the house where the servants do not come to? I don't know of one myself."

"You forget the west wing," retorted Lady Moreton.

"The west wing!" repeated Hester Kershaw," what makes you talk of that oglesome place, my lady?"

"Because it is there that I shall find a safe refuge

from my enemies," exclaimed Lady Moreton. "Have you forgotten that little cell opening off the secret passage, that we discovered when we were exploring the deserted wing. That is a place in which I can lie hid until my uncle comes back here. You will see that I do not starve, will you not?"

"But my lady, how could you even make up your mind to stay in such a dreary hole, and alone too, the greater part of the time, for unless we want to excite suspicion I must go about my daily duties, and show myself as usual," urged Hester.

"Do not remind me of all the solitary hours that I must pass in those deserted rooms, Hester," returned Lady Moreton with a faint shudder. "My heart almost fails me when I think of it; but a woman will do a good deal when her life is in danger, and I am determined, if possible, to save mine. In the first place, you must get some bedding into the little cell, some food, candles, and books, for I should go mad if I was left there alone with no light, and nothing to do."

"That is easily managed, my lady," replied Hester, "fortunately there is a good store of blankets in the press, and plenty of clean linen in the closet outside, but as for food,——" "That you can bring up by degrees, and, above all, avoid exciting suspicion."

"Come, let us get what bedding is necessary, and open the secret door by the fireplace, or we shall have the servants getting up and coming in here.

"Will not your ladyship put on fresh clothes?" asked Hester.

"Certainly, but tie the ones I have taken off up in

a bundle, and take them into the secret chamber. It will never do for the clothes in which I was drowned to be found in my room," said Lady Moreton, with a little hysterical laugh.

The long passage and the narrow little cell did not look any the more inviting on a second visit. There was the same unearthly chilliness, and the same horrible creeping things on the walls, but though Hester Kershaw shuddered from head to foot, and felt her heart thump against her chest, as if it would burst through, Lady Moreton walked boldly on in front, holding up a lighted candle to guide her companion over the heaps of rubbish that encumbered the path; and after a time the cell was reached, and the place of refuge made a little more habitable. After several journeys, in which different articles we carried from the inhabited portion of the house to the west wing, Lady Moreton professed herself satisfied with the arrangements for the present. "And now, dear Hester," said she, "Go, remember that my life hangs upon your discretion; do not give the slightest cause for suspicion, go about your daily duties, but after you retire to bed you can open the secret door, and we can be together for a few hours, when you can tell me all that you have heard."

"I cannot bear to leave you, my lady," said Hester, in faltering accents, "fancy leaving you all alone in this terrible place; I can't do it, my lady, and it is no use asking me."

"Bad as it is, it is more cheerful than the bottom of the river," returned Lady Moreton, with a sad smile on

her lips. "Go now, Hester, and remember that I shall count upon you to bring me something nice for supper to-night. Meanwhile, in your absence, I have this to console myself with," and as she spoke, she laid her hand upon the Bible which Hester had left with her. "Why, cheer up," she continued, "one would almost think that it was you, and not I, that was going to be shut up amongst the ghosts, for, I suppose, it is ghosts that you are afraid of. When you come to-night I will tell you how I escaped from the cruel trap that had been set for me."

With the greatest reluctance, Hester was at last persuaded to leave her dear mistress; but a pang shot through her heart, as she closed the iron door, and felt that Lady Moreton was entirely alone in the west wing.

When Hester was on her way to the housekeeper's room, she met Doctor Stephani on the stairs. There was a blacker cloud than ever on his brow, and his black eyes glared upon her with a look of suspicion and anger.

"Good morning, Mistress Kershaw," said he abruptly. "So I see you still keep to your bedroom off the dead Lady Moreton's chamber?"

Warned as she had been not to give any cause for distrust, Hester could not forbear from plagueing him a little.

"Dead!" said she. "Dear me, sir, have you found the body, then?"

With a muttered curse, the Italian passed by her, and shortly afterwards Hester saw him issuing forth at

the head of the labourers to renew once more the useless task of dragging the river. Nothing could have suited the good old woman better than this. With the enemy she most dreaded far away from the house, it was easy to collect all the little necessaries that were requisite to make her mistress's temporary sojourn in the west wing as comfortable as circumstances would permit, and by the time the doctor and his men returned from the scene of their labours, tired, draggled, and exhausted, she had smuggled up all her little delicacies to the room, which, in the eyes of the household, had so recently lost its beautiful tenant.

That night, when all the dwellers in the house were fast asleep, the secret door opened, and Lady Moreton, gliding like a phantom from the west wing, threw herself into Hester's arms, who was anxiously awaiting her.

"And now, my dear lady," said the faithful old woman, "tell me, as you promised you would do, how it was that you were not drowned when the hand-rail gave way as you leant upon it?"

"For a moment," replied Lady Moreton, "I hardly knew what had happened. The shock that I felt as I fell through the air, and the horrible sensation that I experienced as the cold water closed over my head, and hissed and bubbled in my ears, almost deprived me of consciousness; but, for all that, when I came to the surface I instinctively clung to the frail supports of the bridge. But what was my strength against the overpowering force of the current? Struggle as much as I might, the water was too powerful for me, and swept me away under the bridge with a force that almost

dislocated my arms. Once again the cold water foamed over my face, and it seemed as if I must sink. Almost all the most remarkable events of my life appeared to pass through my brain, and I thought of you, Hester, and the grief that you would feel at my loss. I thought how hard it was for me to die so young, and of the triumph of my cruel persecutors at the success of their vile conspiracy. These thoughts nerved me to make a fresh struggle, but it was of no avail, for the cruel waters rolled me over and over, and bore me away from the banks when I made an effort to reach them. At last my senses must have failed me utterly, and I was hurried away by the stream without being able to help myself in any way."

"My poor lamb," exclaimed Hester, clasping her hands, as with tears trickling down her cheeks she listened to Lady Moreton's recital.

"A merciful Providence must have kept me on the surface of the water," continued the unhappy lady, "and I was aroused from my stupor by a violent blow on the head. Looking round I saw that I had passed through the shallows below the bridge, and drifted against one of the trees which fringe the island. Hardly knowing what I did, I managed to grasp its trunk, and by that means drew myself on to dry land. Then for nearly half an hour I lay stretched upon the ground, every bone and limb aching, as if I had been severely beaten. As I lay there my memory came slowly back to me, and I felt certain that some snare had been set for me, or else why should the rail, upon which I had rested a score of times, have

broken away so suddenly? It must have been cut through."

"And so it was, my lady," interposed Hester, "for Hodkiss, the hinde, and I, both saw the rail with the clean-cut marks of the teeth of the saw on it, and Mr. Craddock, to whom I sent it, has taken it up to London with him."

"You will wonder, Hester, why I did not attempt to get across the park, and wait at the little gate for my uncle, but I feared that before twelve o'clock came the news of my death would be spread abroad, and therefore I should find no one there."

"You were wrong, my lady," cried Hester; "both Mr. Craddock and Master Clinton were there waiting for you."

"Yes, I daresay I was wrong, but my brain was in a whirl."

"I felt that I was no longer safe in the exposed position in which I was, for in a short time I knew that a search would be made for me; but where could I fly to, and where could I find a safe place of refuge. Then the idea of the west wing came across my mind, and I thought that if I could hide up until the search was over I might creep into the house, and after finding you, take refuge in the place of concealment that we had discovered. But just now I was imprisoned in an island in the centre of the river, and though the water was very calm and still, yet it extended for a great distance on either side. I had lost my hat, my shoes had been washed off my feet, and my clothes, of course, were soaked through and through. Nevertheless, I

must make an immediate decision, and I suddenly remembered that I had heard that in the shallows the water was not more than three feet deep. Picking up the long branch of a tree that lay near, I stepped into the water once again, with fear and trembling ; and, carefully feeling the way with my stick, managed to reach the opposite bank."

"How brave you were. I could never have entered the water again, I am sure," murmured Hester.

"I thought," continued Lady Moreton, "that if I could hide myself in the great woods which run down to the river on each side, that I could, after dark, creep up to the Court, and get into the house by that little door, the secret of which you one day showed to me. Do you not remember ?"

Hester nodded her head in sign of assent.

"There was an old sawpit some two hundred yards away from the bank, and into it I crept," resumed Lady Moreton, "and covered myself up with a quantity of dry leaves that had been lying there since last year. But there was so much bustle, and such a noise on the river banks, that I did not dare to move, and lay in my hiding-place trembling and quivering with fear and cold. All that time I had nothing to eat but a few berries, and it was not until about eleven at night that I ventured to leave my hiding-place, and come up to the Court, for I thought that if I took refuge in the west wing you could take the news of my safety to Uncle Craddock, who I fancied would still be lingering about the place. When I had, with the greatest precaution, managed to get to my room, my senses were so

benumbed with cold and hunger that I never thought of the dressing-room, so when I did not see you at once I tried to find the spring of the secret door, but I could not do so, and then, Hester, then——"

"Hist!" cried Hester, "I hear footsteps. Do not lose a moment, but away. I will rejoin you presently."

Without a word Lady Moreton fled, and hardly had the aperture been closed, than a heavy hand struck on the panels of the door, and the voice of Doctor Stephani was heard crying:

"Are you there, Mistress Kershaw, and who are you talking to? Open the door, or I will break it in at once."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FACE TO FACE.

CASTING a hasty glance around her to see that no traces remained of Lady Moreton's recent presence, Hester Kershaw slowly crossed the room, and opened the door. Without another word Doctor Stephani pushed her roughly aside, and strode into the chamber.

"Who were you talking to just now?" asked he, angrily.

"Who does a woman talk to when she is by herself, pray?" retorted Hester, who was determined not to be browbeaten by him.

"You mean that you were talking to yourself. I say that is all nonsense, people don't speak aloud when they are alone; besides, I heard two voices distinctly," said the doctor, with a heavy scowl.

"You did not," replied Hester, stoutly.

Doctor Stephani looked at her earnestly, and no doubt detected a mocking devil in her eye, for he at once continued:

"If you do not reply to me civilly I will have you turned out of the house at once."

"Turned out of the house, indeed, and whom by, pray?" exclaimed Hester, bristling up. "I have not

been here all these years to be sent away from Moreton Court by a beggarly Italian doctor. I will go straight to my lord and see what he says about it, and I will thank you to come with me, so that you may not be able to say that I told lies about you."

"A clever move on your part, old lady," replied the doctor with a satanic smile, "but you do not get me out of this room until I have examined it carefully. As for you, you can go as soon as you like, and take any complaint you may choose to Lord Moreton."

"I will not leave this room without you," said Hester, planting her foot firmly on the flooring. "You have no right in my room, and if you do not leave it at once, I will ring the alarm bell, the rope of which hangs yonder, and bring up those who will pitch you out neck and crop, favourite of my lord though you be."

For an instant the light of murder shone in the Italian's eyes, but he curbed his passion by a strong effort of will, and at length it died away. "Very good, Mistress Hester," said he, with a mocking bow, "I never think of contesting a point with a lady. To-day you have your turn, but as the classics say *Cras mihi*, which has been roughly translated

To-day for thee,
To-morrow for me,

and therefore I will leave you, and if you wish, we will go together to my lord's room."

"Not I, doctor," returned Hester with a smile. "You gentlefolks may have time to waste in senseless talk,

but I must look after my work, and I have four large stewpans of preserving fruit to be attended to. By the way, are you going to drag the river again to-day?"

"You seem very much interested in the finding of the body," retorted the doctor.

"Yes, of course I am, are not you?" replied Hester, quickly.

Under this direct home-thrust the doctor grew pale.

"Of course, poor creature," said he after a moment's pause, "we are anxious that her body should have Christian burial."

"Christian burial!" echoed Hester, "I have heard of the devil quoting Scripture, but never of the murderer being anxious about the burial of his victim."

By this time the doctor had gone out into the corridor, and she had followed him; but at these words, he darted upon her and clutched her by the arm. "Explain your meaning," cried he, in a voice half-stifled with passion.

Hester looked steadily up into his face, though his grasp upon her arm was like an iron vice, and her flesh was crushed, and bruised beneath it.

"Look at your own face in the glass, and you will find an answer to your question, but let go my arm, or I will call for help, and raise the house," replied she, boldly.

Paralysed by her audacity, the doctor released her, and slowly passed down the corridor. "Curse her," muttered he, as he walked along with his head sunk upon his breast. "Does she know anything, or was it a mere random shot? At any rate she is

dangerous, and means mischief. Ah! if we were only in my own sweet country, where a talkative woman is silenced as easily as a troublesome man; but here the risk would be too great; a second tragedy at Moreton Court, as it would be called, would draw all eyes upon us. Patience friend Angelo, patience; everything comes to the man who waits, and I must not lose my lotus-eating life amongst the rose gardens of Damascus by any undue haste. Only, until the body is discovered how can we deal with these accursed insurance offices. Aha! my dear lord, I half fear that you will by this game lose fortune, wife, and friend, and a sad loss the last will be to you, for never will you again find such a one as I have been to you. Why, I do not believe that I have ever interfered with you in any way, I have never striven to turn your inclinations to good, but that was because you never had any that way, nor did I urge you to evil, because you required no urging. All I have done was to confirm you in every vice, and *per Bacco,* you did not require much confirmation, and if I have taken charge of your money, surely I am likely to make a much better use of it than you would, for I shall spend it on my own enjoyment, whereas you would lavish it all on that mad idea of yours, the discovery of the philosophers' stone; but there, I must not complain, for that craze which I fostered has put many a golden guinea into my pocket.

With these thoughts passing through his mind, the crafty doctor took his way to his patron's room to propose to him some fresh scheme by which they might profit by Lady Moreton's decease. As for Hester,

although she felt that she had had the best of the encounter, yet as she thought over it, her heart sank within her. Had she by any indiscreet word or look, for with an adversary of the doctor's astuteness, every look even had to be carefully considered, given him any clue to Lady Moreton's preservation. She thought not, but still there was his presence at her chamber door to be accounted for. He must have had some suspicions, or else he would not have been spying about. One thing she made up her mind to, and that was that her dear mistress must not leave the secret chamber again until she was taken away from it by her uncle Humphrey, and that very night instead of waiting for Lady Moreton's arrival, she opened the secret door, and closing it carefully behind her, crept along the corridor.

CHAPTER XIX.

CLOSING IN.

ONCE more Lord Moreton and his dangerous adviser sat in the former's sanctum. As usual the table was covered with bottles and glasses, but for once the little lord's brain did not appear to be affected by his potations, although the hectic flush upon his cheek, and his unsteady hand showed that he had been drinking deeply. He was evidently very uneasy, and ever and again glanced round nervously towards the door, as though he expected some unwelcome guest to cross the threshold.

The dark cloud still hung over the doctor's brow, and contrary to his usual habit, he filled and emptied his glass with great rapidity, but the wine seemed to have no effect upon him, for his face was as colourless as the purest marble. The roar of the furnace in the adjacent room was hushed, and from the comparative coolness of the temperature of the chamber in which they were sitting, it was evident that the researches into the almost forgotten lore of the alchemist had ceased for a time. For a few minutes neither men spoke, but filled and refilled their glasses with persistent regularity; at last however, Lord Moreton broke the silence. "Stephani," said he, in his accustomed sneering manner, "You have

been a sad bungler, and now I am sorry to see that you are taking to drink, you will soon have every vice ; but intoxication" added his lordship with a slight hiccup, "is where I draw the line, and if you fall a victim to that failing, you and I will have to part."

"You never spoke a truer word than that, my lord," answered the Italian in his clear, cold, decisive tones.

"We may have to part, and that much sooner than you expect."

"What do you mean by that, sirrah?" exclaimed his patron, draining off a glass of port as though to give himself an access of courage. "Is this insolence? and do you venture to use it as a threat to me?"

"No threat, my lord—the time has passed for threats. It is our position that will separate us. Whoever heard of two prisoners being permitted to share the same cell?"

"I have, plenty of times," answered Lord Moreton. "But what stuff are you talking about prisoners? Who are likely to be in that predicament?"

"You and I, my lord, and that right soon, unless we can find some loophole of escape," returned the doctor.

"And what for, pray?" sneered Lord Moreton.

"For the murder of your wife, my lord," answered the Italian, calmly.

"You lie, you dog!—you lie!" cried his lordship. "I had nothing to do with it,"—and in a sudden frenzy of passion he dashed the glass of wine he held in his hand full in the doctor's face.

The doctor calmly removed the liquor from his cheek with his handkerchief.

"If we could clear ourselves of the accusation that hangs over us as easily as I remove the wine from my face, we should be fortunate men; but as you have now insulted and degraded me, I shall leave you, Lord Moreton, and take measures for my own safety"; and, as he spoke, the doctor rose from his chair, and made a step towards the door.

Hardly had he attempted to make a move, however, than Lord Moreton sprang to his feet.

"What, in the name of all that is absurd, are you doing," cried he.

"Releasing you from a presence which has evidently grown irksome to you, my lord," replied the doctor.

"Here—here! I know I was wrong. I didn't mean it; but I was so infernally annoyed. That cold, callous, calculating manner of yours is enough to drive a man to distraction. Sit down, and let us talk over matters quietly."

"My lord," answered Doctor Stephani, coldly, returning to the table, and resuming his seat, "I am willing to make every allowance for the position in which you are placed——"

"I—placed!" repeated Lord Moreton, angrily.

"Certainly. You are the party most interested in your wife's death. What benefit could I possibly derive from it?—I, a poor foreign doctor, and your lordship's most humble servant?"

"Curse you, Stephani!" howled Lord Moreton. "What do you mean by torturing me like this? Did you not instigate me to——"

"*Basta*, my lord! *basta*—a silent tongue makes a

heavy purse," said the doctor, hastily. "We never know who is listening.

"Well, then, sit down, and talk matters over quietly," continued Lord Moreton. "What has made you so terribly nervous?'

"Where is Lady Moreton?" asked the doctor, bending across the table, and placing his mouth close to his patron's ear.

"You ought to know better than I do," said Lord Moreton, endeavouring to look at his questioner steadily, but failing signally in the operation.

"She ought to be at the bottom of the river—but is she?" said the Italian, with grim earnestness. "I hate all this mystery and uncertainty. What is it that makes Hester Kershaw so insolent? She walks about the Court as if it were her own, and we were mere slaves here on sufference. What can she know? The snare was artfully planned, and I do not believe that a strong man could have carried his life through that mass of broken water, much less a frail, weak woman; and yet we can find no body. I tell you, my lord, we are on the brink of a precipice, and Hester Kershaw's hand will be the one that will cast us over headlong to destruction."

"Come, cease this croaking, man!" said Lord Moreton, filling his glass with an unsteady hand. "You talked in a very different way when you proposed the plan. What has made you take such a sudden turn?"

"Do you ever read the Bible, my lord?" asked Stephani, suddenly.

"'Pon my word, I don't think I ever have. Do you?"

"Oh, yes. There is some fine reading in the book of Moses—good histories of revenge and destruction; tales that seem written in characters of fire, on blood-stained pages. But as your lordship is no student of biblical lore, it is useless to ask you if you remember the story of Sisera, and Jael, the wife of Heber, the Kenite?" asked the Italian.

"Quite useless, my good fellow," returned his lordship, with a yawn; "and on my word, I cannot think why you refer to such old-world trash."

"It says, 'the stars in their courses fought against Sisera,'" pursued the doctor, "and, mighty man of war as he was, a woman's hand brought his head to the dust at last. My lord, our star which seemed to promise so much, has paled, and is on the wane, and unless I am entirely mistaken, Hester Kershaw's hand will deal the blow that will shatter all our schemes like glass."

"You are all talk, Stephani," growled Lord Moreton. "You great talkers are little doers. Why, I have often heard you say that you had mapped out a road in which to walk, and that you would not hesitate to remove any obstacle, whatever it might be, that you found in your way. If the old woman is blocking up the road why don't you—eh?"

"Because," answered the doctor, passionately—"because I dare not. Ay, my lord, you may laugh at me if you will, but there is a something holds back my hand, I cannot say what it is, but I dare not lay a

finger on that old woman ; and yet I feel that it is her life or mine, and that if I do not take extreme measures, she will have her foot on my neck yet."

"Dreams—idle dreams, Stephani!" cried Lord Moreton. "Take your wine, man, and rouse yourself. Have the men and the drags out to-morrow, and search every hole and pool in the river. We must have money. This search for the elixir has forestalled all the rents. The furnace has gone out, and we shall have to begin again. But what of that? We shall have plenty of money, only you must fish up Lady Moreton. Why, man, I thought you were an infidel, and here I find you giving way to a mere feeling of superstition."

"You are superstitious too, my lord," replied the doctor, gloomily, "or you would not believe in all that nonsence about the west wing."

Lord Moreton grew deadly pale, and a shudder convulsed his puny frame.

"Hush, Stephani!" said he, in faltering accents. "Don't let us talk of such things—and yet, perhaps, it would be better to do so. Do you know what has made me speak up so boldly to-night?"

"No," answered the doctor, "unless it is the wine."

"I want money for the elixir of life," continued Lord Moreton. "I don't want to die—I am afraid of death, and he is near me now. I have had a sign—a sure sign—such as has never deceived us Moretons."

"What, have you met a black cat, or heard a beetle at work in the mouldering wainscoting, which fools call a death-watch?" asked the doctor, scornfully.

"I have had a sure sign, you infernal scoffer!"

exclaimed the little lord, savagely. "A sign that, as I tell you, never deceives us. Do you suppose that we men of high birth are not different from you, in whose veins the plebian blood creeps and stagnates? Come near, Stephani, and I will whisper it to you—*I have seen a light in the west wing!*"

"A light in the west wing?" cried the doctor, astonished in spite of himself.

"Hush! Not so loud," pleaded Lord Moreton. "I know well what it is. *They* are getting all ready for me. Have you never heard of the strange forms that are seen, and the spectral coach that bears away the dead Moreton? I tell you, Stephani, that my end is drawing near, and that unless the elixir is produced very shortly, my days are numbered. Help me, dear Stephani, I cannot die yet. You shall have all that I possess, but I must in return have life—yes, and a long life."

As he spoke, Lord Moreton gazed entreatingly upon the doctor, and clasped his hand with fervour.

"A light in the west wing," mused the doctor.

"Yes, in the west wing, and not at any of the windows, but shining out through the ivy, where there is no aperture," continued Lord Moreton—"a bright flame that glanced, and glimmered, and threw a light on the pavement of the courtyard, that looked to me like a gibbet," added he, with a faint shudder.

"A light in the west wing!" repeated the doctor. "Where are the keys? Who has charge of them, my lord?"

"Old Kershaw, of course," answered his lordship,

peevishly; "but *they* want no keys. Do you think that *they* go in like mortals, through doorways?"

"So Hester Kershaw has the keys," said the doctor, thoughtfully, paying no heed to his patron's question. "This may go far towards confirming my suspicions."

"Suspicions, man? What do you mean?" asked Lord Moreton, angrily. "I tell you that no earthly hand lighted the flame I saw in the west wing."

"And I tell you, you besotted idiot," cried the doctor, losing his patience, "that the light you saw was a candle, lighted by that accursed Hester Kershaw for your wife, who is now concealed within the mouldering walls of the west wing."

"My wife alive?" exclaimed Lord Moreton, starting to his feet.

"Ay, by some evil chance, How she escaped I know not; but escaped she certainly has. This will account for Hester Kershaw's mysterious doings; this will account for the whispered conversation that I believed I heard in her room. So Lady Moreton is alive. Away with all the idle fears that have laid hold on me up to this! Angelo Stephani is a man once more, and a man that will relentlessly pursue his purpose to the bitter end. My Lord, if your wife is in the west wing she must die, and that marplot, Hester Kershaw, with her!"

"Then you do not think that the light I saw was a supernatural one?" asked Lord Moreton, earnestly.

"It was a candle lighted by one of those two women," replied Stephani, who had risen from his seat, and was pacing the room with lengthened strides.

"And Lady Moreton is alive, you think?" said he,

"I am as certain of it as that you are seated there," returned the doctor.

"Then let her live, Stephani—let her live," pleaded Lord Moreton. "Ever since all these plots and schemes have been going on, my brain has seemed to be in a perfect whirl. And as that was not a supernatural appearance, of course I am not going to die yet, so that the elixir can wait. You are so clever that you can easily hit on another plan to replenish our coffers —eh, Stephani?"

"My lord," answered the doctor, grimly, "in the path we are treading there is no retreat—we must press on to the appointed end. Since Humphrey Craddock and his young cub have interfered, there is no safety for us, for the attempt will lead us to destruction as surely as if the deed had been done. We must go on, my lord. Lady Moreton must die, and her body be found in the river. As for Hester Kershaw, the west wing is vast and lonely enough for her bones to bleach there undiscovered, as long as the old walls hold together."

"Stephani, I will not have it!" screamed Lord Moreton. "I am your master, and I order you to stop. If not, I will denounce you, and you shall swing for what you have already done!"

"Not so, my lord," returned the doctor, coolly, "for by so doing you would only put your own neck into a noose. When all is over you will thank me for what I have done."

"Never," shrieked Lord Moreton, "never, you shall not quit this room. It is not because I have a horror of

the crime," he added as though apologising for an act of weakness on his part, "but because I think that it is useless, and will only lead to further complications; besides, my good fellow, you have lost your head, and are acting from instinct and not from reason."

"Fool!" cried Stephani, whose passions had risen to their highest pitch. "Do you think that I am going to have all my schemes upset by your paltry cowardice? Hands off," he added savagely, as Lord Moreton clutched him by the arm, "Hands off, I say, or I may do what I shall afterwards be sorry for."

But in spite of this menace Lord Moreton clung tightly to him, begging and entreating him to reconsider his determination; and, strong as the doctor was, he could not shake off the restraining clasp. For a moment his hand sought his bosom, but with a muttered oath he withdrew it, and then gathering up all his strength into one mighty effort, he hurled his patron from him. The unhappy young nobleman spun round once or twice, and then, after a futile effort to regain his balance fell with a crash into a corner of the room, where he lay without sense or motion.

"He will be all right shortly," said Stephani, bending over him for a moment. "I think that my nearest way to solve the riddle will be to go direct to Hester Kershaw's room." And with an evil smile upon his face, and his right hand buried in the bosom of his coat, he left the apartment.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ORDER OF RELEASE.

LADY MORETON had, as usual, ventured from her place of concealment in the west wing in order to have a little conversation with Hester. Solitude and anxiety had imprinted their traces upon her features, her cheeks were of an ashy pallor, and there were large dark circles round her eyes.

"My lamb, my dear lady," cried Hester, as she clasped the hunted woman in her arms as soon as she stepped through the secret door. "How happy I am to see you again, and yet how ill and pale you look; my mind always misgives me when I think of you shut up all alone in those ghostly rooms, and I continually dream of some mishap befalling you. How you can bear it I cannot imagine."

"I can bear it no longer, Hester, and I came to-night to tell you so. That place is full of a silent and unutterable horror. As I sit there alone, my mind, strive as I will, strays to all the hideous legends and grisly tales that I have ever heard. I can hear the sound of phantom footfalls, feel the touch of spectral fingers, whilst my ears are filled with ghostly whispers, in which I can only detect the words 'Fly,' 'Murder.' Oh! Hester

when there is not a breath of wind stirring, doors open and shut, and the stairs creak as though under a heavy weight. There is an unseen presence all around me that seems to dull my brain, and trample out every atom of courage that I possess; and when evening comes, and the dark shadows begin to fall, and pile themselves up in corners of the room, they seem to assume hideous, uncouth shapes, which are watching me, and ready to pounce on me the moment I am off my guard. I tell you that I have sat trembling in the dark not daring to light my lamp, lest it should disclose some monstrous form standing before me, or sitting by my side. No, I can bear it no longer, sooner a cruel death at the hands of that murderous Italian than a longer sojourn in the west wing. At any risk I must leave the house to-night, and I look to you, dear Hester, for aid to do so."

"My dear lady," returned the faithful old woman, "if you would only allow me to speak, I was going to tell you that your time of trial is over; and was even about to propose to you to leave the Court this very night."

"Do you mean it?" cried Lady Moreton, clasping the housekeeper's hands in ecstasy, "am I really to leave this hateful place at once?"

"Yes, my dear, as soon as my lord and the doctor are safely bestowed for the night, we will steal out, and cross the park to the little gate ——"

"We shall have to cross the bridge," said Lady Moreton, with a slight shiver.

"Well, my dearie, will you not be safe with your old Hester? But you do not ask me why this sudden change has taken place in our plans?" returned the old woman.

"It has taken me so much by surprise, that I can hardly understand anything, but what is it all, and where are we going to, Hester dear, somewhere a long way off I hope, where my lord and the doctor will be unable to find me again?"

"Only as far as the 'Seven Stars,' my lady," answered Hester.

"Only to the 'Seven Stars'!" repeated Lady Moreton, "why I shall be caught and brought back at once."

"I think not, my dear lady, for you will find someone to guard and protect you there. Someone that you have been waiting for a long time."

"What, my uncle Humphrey?" murmured Lady Moreton faintly.

"Yes, dear, Mr. Humphrey Craddock arrived here this afternoon, and some one else too," said Hester, archly.

"Clinton Hawley?" asked Lady Moreton, a faint blush suffusing her cheeks.

"Yes, yes, he is there, and in a couple of hours' time you shall be in safe custody, and it will be a bolder man than my lord, or his cut-throat Italian who will tear you from it. Only pluck up a little heart, my lady, one last effort, and all your troubles are over. Is there anything you want out of the west wing?"

"No, no, nothing at all," exclaimed Lady Moreton, clasping her hands with a shudder, "I never want to go into the hideous place again. I have everything here that I require. The night is warm, and if I throw on a cloak——"

"You must dress more than that, my lady, and take a few necessaries in a hand-bag, for doubtless Mr.

Craddock will take you away to London town directly. I will get what you want together, whilst you sit down and try to pick a bit. See what a nice supper I have for you, a dear little boiled fowl and some clotted cream, with apricot preserve. Why the servants are thinking that dame Hester is getting quite a glutten in her old age. Come, my dear, the sooner you have finished your snack, the sooner we shall be able to leave the Court."

Thus adjured, Lady Moreton sat down to table, and with the prospect of escape before her, and the knowledge that there were to be no more days and nights of terror passed in the west wing, made quite a hearty meal, whilst Hester bustled about making preparations for the approaching departure.

"There now," cried she, as she saw that her mistress had finished her chicken, "do just eat a little morsel of cream and preserve, and let me pour you out a glass of Malmsey, for you want something to keep up your strength, and then we shall be ready to go."

"Oh! Hester," said Lady Moreton, "I am so excited at the idea of regaining my liberty, and feeling the fresh air of heaven blowing on my cheek, and the turf beneath my feet, that I can hardly bear to delay another moment; you dear old thing, do make haste, will you never have done packing?"

"There, my dear lady, it is all over at last," said Hester, as she fastened the last strap of the bag, "now throw on your cloak and hat, and we will be going, for I am sure that all is safe by this time."

In five minutes more, both she and Hester were

ready, and as the housekeeper laid her hand upon the lock of the door, Lady Moreton exclaimed impulsively: "And now I am free, and I hope I shall never see this place again. Come on, for we have a long way to go."

As she spoke, Hester threw open the door, and both women started back with a cry of affright as the dark figure of the doctor was disclosed standing on the threshold.

"You are right, Lady Moreton," said he, stepping into the room, and closing the door behind him. "You shall soon be free, and you shall never see this house again, for you have a long way to go, further, perhaps, than you expect."

There was a glance of lurid fire in Doctor Stephani's eyes as he stepped up closer to her, and with another faint shriek, Lady Moreton recoiled a few steps, and then remained perfectly motionless, like the bird that is rendered powerless by the fascination of the deadly snake. Not so with Hester; darting between her mistress and the Italian, she boldly faced him, prepared to give up her life sooner than a hair of her young mistress's head should be injured. Whilst standing in this defiant attitude, she raised her voice, and cried to her mistress to escape. "Quick, my lady," cried she, "the secret door—through the west wing, and make for the park—the villain shall not pass me."

But Lady Moreton seemed rooted to the ground with terror.

"Foolish woman," exclaimed the doctor in his deep voice. "There is no escape for you. There is not a soul stirring in this part of the house. Hester Kershaw,

if you care for such mummery say a prayer, for I am going to send you on your journey before your mistress."

As he spoke, his hand sought his bosom, and flashed out again in a moment, armed with a keen cruel knife.

"Fly, my lady," said Hester, making no effort to withdraw herself from the deadly peril that menaced her, but never taking her eye off the doctor. "Fly, I tell you, he shall not follow you."

As one awakening from a dream, Lady Moreton caught up the little hand lamp that stood upon the table close by, and with a rapid movement, darted through the secret door, which still remained open. With a cry of disappointed rage, Stephani made an effort to spring after her, but found himself tightly clutched in Hester's powerful arms.

Strain and struggle as he might, she still clung to him, and wreathed around his limbs so as to render him utterly powerless; with one hand she grasped his right wrist, and rendered it impossible for him to use his knife, whilst with the other she clutched his thick forest of black hair. With his disengaged hand he beat her upturned face, which she was utterly unable to protect, so savagely, that the blood gushed from it, but in spite of this, the undaunted woman maintained her hold.

"Let me go, you she-devil," gasped the Italian, vainly endeavouring to release himself, and maddened at the disappearance of his intended victim. "Release me, I say," and he redoubled his shower of blows upon the defenceless face; but Hester, although she felt that her senses were fast quitting her, still maintained her

grasp, and after a few moments more struggling, they both fell to the ground. The shock enabled the Italian to free the hand that clutched his knife, and striking twice, with a bitter curse, at Hester, he inflicted two wounds, the scars of which she will carry to her dying day; then springing to his feet, he darted through the secret door in pursuit of Lady Moreton, whose course he could trace by the lamp she carried.

"The lamp! throw away the lamp!" cried Hester, as bleeding profusely, she rose to her knees, "throw away the lamp, and make for the further door."

A tinkle of shivering glass, and then a sudden darkness, showed that Lady Moreton had followed her injunction; then, with her last remaining strength, she closed the secret door, and crawling into the dressing-room, rang the alarm bell with all the energy of which she was capable. It was the last effort of exhausted nature, and in another moment she sank fainting on the floor.

CHAPTER XXI.

DOCTOR STEPHANI LOSES THE GAME.

THE clang of the alarm bell roused the whole household, and all poured out into the courtyard in wonder and amazement at the summons. As for the cause, however, they were not long left in doubt, for a lurid light began to show behind the windows of the west wing, and then spiral curls of smoke were seen twisting out of the various apertures and fissures of the building. Then, with a sudden roar, a sheet of flame poured out of one of the windows, devouring sash and glass at one fell swoop, and as the assembled servants gazed stupidly at this unexpected phenomenon, the fiery torrent burst out of another and yet another window. Then, with a crackling of joists and rafters, tongues of flame made their appearance between the broken tiles with which the roof was covered, and in a few minutes the tall chimneys seemed to be rising from a sea of flame. Men looked eagerly round for Lord Moreton, or Doctor Stephani, to issue directions, but as yet neither of them had made their appearance. Suddenly a faint cry was heard from a window in another portion of the house, and the bloodstained face of Hester Kershaw was discerned, whilst she urged

them frantically to batter in the doors of the west wing, and save her lady, who was imprisoned in the burning building. Lady Moreton shut up in the flames? It seemed incredible that the lady for whose body they had been seeking in the cold depths of the river, should be a prisoner in that fiery furnace. But all knew that Hester Kershaw was not a woman to speak without reason, and whilst some started off in quest of crowbars and hatchets to break in the door, others went up to her room to see if they could not give her the assistance of which she seemed sorely in need. Presently she was hurried into the courtyard, pale and faint from loss of blood, but sustained by her indomitable will, and more than ever determined to rescue her beloved mistress from the terrible fate which awaited her. Meanwhile axe and crowbar were plyed with vigour, but the doors were of stout oak, and the panels lined with sheet iron, so that but little progress was made; and the tiles that came rattling off the roof frequently drove the workers away from the door. Whilst the confusion was at its height, a young man, whose appearance showed that he had been running for some distance, burst into the courtyard, and eagerly enquired what had happened. Recognizing Clinton Hawley, Hester called him to her, and hurriedly explained what had occurred.

"I told my lady," gasped the wounded woman, "to throw away the lamp, so that the black-hearted scoundrel might be unable to follow her, and as the whole place was as dry and rotten as tinder, I expect that it blazed up almost in a moment. If she had time to gain

the door at the other end of the pass ge, and close it, the Italian is lost, for he will be enclosed between the doors, the secret of neither of which he knows."

"Never mind him," cried Clinton, "the villain is rightly served. But where can Lady Moreton be?"

"She will come straight to the great door," said Hester, faintly. "Do not let them lose a moment in bursting it open, or the poor dear lamb may be stifled, even if she is not already burnt to a cinder."

Without listening to another word, Clinton wrenched an axe from the hand of a man standing by, and, regardless of the fiery hail from above, attacked the massive door with a violence which soon effected a breach in it. Encouraged by his example, and by his lavish promises of reward, the men about lent him a hand with a hearty goodwill, and in a few minutes the door began to shake and tremble.

The fire, however, had now gained a complete mastery, and the whole of the west wing was in a light blaze. The owls and bats that had long dwelt in peace and security in its neglected chambers, whirred up in astonishment at the noise and hubbub, and, dazzled by the light, fell back into the flames, and perished miserably.

Swarms of rats, coming from no one knew where, poured into the courtyard, whilst the roar of the flames, the falling of the beams, and the splitting of the heavy stones, almost drowned the shouts of encouragement with which the workers accompanied their toil. As dazed-looking as the unfortunate owls, Lord Moreton presently made his appearance, and standing aloof,

gazed upon the scene of destruction with an air of stupid vacancy. No one took any notice of him, for all were looking intently on the burning building, in which it was rumoured that Lady Moreton was imprisoned.

Whilst the excitement was at its height, a gig drove up to the gate, and two men hurriedly descended from it.

"Where is Lord Moreton?" asked Humphrey Craddock, who was one of the new arrivals.

Half a dozen of the bystanders eagerly pointed out the place where Lord Moreton stood listlessly gazing at the flames.

"Bunting," said Humphrey Craddock, "you know your duty, do it."

"In course I does," answered the man, with a half sulky air, as he sauntered to the spot where Lord Moreton was standing.

At that instant a chimney stack fell with a loud crash, and a cloud of sparks, followed by a sheet of flame which made the whole courtyard as light as day, shot up, whilst a cheer from the party toiling at the door announced that at last their work was completed.

"Beg pardon, Lord Moreton," said the runner, for such the man was, stopping in front of the owner of Moreton Court, "but could I have a word with you."

Lord Moreton gazed upon him with lack-lustre eyes, but made no reply.

"You see it's felony, my lord," said the man, confidentially, "I haven't no alternative except to slip the

bracelets on," and, as he spoke, with professional dexterity he handcuffed Lord Moreton almost before he was aware of what was taking place.

"Fellow!" said the prisoner, in high indignation, "what is the meaning of this insolence? Stephani, where is Stephani?"

"I wants him too, my lord," resumed the officer, "he as principal, and you as accessory, to the murder of Gladys, Lady Moreton."

But as he spoke, Lord Moreton's eyes turned from him, and gazed with a look of unutterable horror upon some object on the other side of the courtyard. The door of the west wing had yielded beneath the blows of its assailants, and as it fell to the right and left it disclosed behind it the figure of Lady Moreton. She had cast a blanket about her head to preserve herself from the falling sparks, and, with her pale face, her eyes starting with terror, and her whole figure framed by the bright glare of the fire, she might well have been taken for one of the spirits that haunted the west wing.

But upon Lord Moreton, who, in spite of Stephani's statement, still believed that his wife was lying drowned in some dark pool of the river, the effect was inexpressibly terrifying. Raising his manacled hands above his head he uttered a wild shriek of alarm, a few inarticulate words burst from his lips, and then, without an effort to save himself, he fell headlong to the ground. They raised him up, and with care and trouble restored the life which the terrible shock had nearly driven from a frame weak by nature, and enervated by excess; but

there was a task beyond their power, and that was to re-illumine the lamp of reason, that had flickered and gone out.

Always weak-minded, the shock had been too much for the feeble brain, and the cruel, cowardly young man had sunk into a mere malignant idiot, without the cunning to conceal his fiendish proclivities.

No efforts could save the west wing, and as Hester obstinately refused to explain the cause of her wounds, and Lady Moreton said no word of her having closed the second door of the secret passage behind her, the disappearance of the Italian doctor was shrouded in mystery, though the rustics still talk of the night when Old Nick came to take away the doctor, and burnt down the west wing of Moreton Court in doing so.

Humphrey Craddock lost no time in moving his niece from a spot, the sight of which would bring so many harrowing recollections to her mind, and in company with his adopted son, and Tom Bunting, who in spite of the munificent sum that he received as a reward, grumbled much at having been defrauded of the glory of arresting a real live lord; "and t'other chap!" he would say, when repeating the story, "t'other chap, too, managed to slip through my fingers, I don't know how, for as to Old Nick taking him off, that's all gammon, for I'm too religious a chap to believe that the devil would interfere with a Bow Street Runner."

As soon as Hester's wounds would permit it, she was removed to a charming villa which uncle Humphrey possessed on the South Coast, for as Lady Moreton's fellow-travellers in the coach had surmised, his pecu-

niary losses were only a *ruse* on his part, to deceive his niece's father, to which he had taken Gladys. She was most affectionately received by her grateful mistress, and as the old woman possessed a strong constitution, she was soon able to move about, but with a memento of that memorable evening in the shape of two deep scars, which she will never get rid of.

Lord Moreton was removed by order of the Court of Chancery, to an asylum where he lingered for some twelve months a hopeless idiot, betraying to the last a most hideous air of vindictive cruelty which it required all the care and attention of his keepers to repress.

Moreton Court then passed into the hands of some distant relatives, and a range of stables was built over the site of the west wing, so that even the spot where Doctor Stephani met his death was obliterated from the sight of man.

* * * *

About a twelvemonth after Lord Moreton's death, as Uncle Humphrey was reading the newspaper, his niece came into the room, and, walking close up to him, said, "uncle Humphrey."

"Well, my pet," answered the old man, "what is it?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Gladys, with a deep blush.

"Oh no, of course I could not," answered uncle Humphrey, ironically.

"Well, then, Clinton put a question to me to-day," said she, shyly.

"What! only to-day? How slow young fellows are nowadays," said Humphrey Craddock, with a laugh, "I have been expecting him to do it a month back."

"Well, if you know all about it, I suppose you don't want to know my answer," said Gladys, with a pretty pout.

"Not a bit, my pet, and very glad I am of it. It has realised the dearest wish of my heart," returned the old man, giving her a hearty kiss.

"But stop, Uncle, you are in too great a hurry," said she, holding up her finger, archly. "Before I consented I insisted upon one condition."

"Bless my heart, I hope you are not going to insist on a long engagement, my dear," returned uncle Humphrey, in some alarm.

"No, I only stipulated that whatever might happen, dear old Hester and I should never be parted.

THE END.

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